

**USP 313U Urban Environmental Issues
Spring 2026 | M/W 11:00a-12:40p | Urban Center 250**

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COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

Our planet is currently confronted by two interrelated and concurrent developments: rapid urbanization and unprecedented global-scale environmental issues. Ecological degradation and declines in natural resources are, in large part, due to the economic and consumptive appetites of our cities and the people who live in them. Cities also suffer internal environmental problems such as unequal access to (clean) resources. At the same time, cities present an opportunity to live more sustainably through urban density, more efficient use of natural resources, and innovative ideas that address critical environmental issues. Taken together, these developments leave policymakers, scientists, scholars, and other concerned citizens debating the role of cities in exacerbating environmental issues while also being the source of solutions to these issues.

This course will explore this central paradox – the city as source of and solution to environmental problems – and address the following questions: What are the major urban environmental problems in cities around the world? How are environmental issues driving urbanization and how is urban development driving environmental degradation? What does the relationship between (urban) humans and nature look like historically? Currently? In the future? Are sustainable cities possible, and if so, what are they trying to sustain and how do they do so? How do cities fit into nature?

In order to address these questions (and others), we will explore historical context of urban environmental issues, ecological issues related to industrialization and global urbanization, and frameworks for analyzing urban environmental issues. The last few weeks of the course will explore a series of cases (water, transportation, food, waste) related to urban environments. Students will learn about the variety of environmental issues cities face, the way cities have attempted to manage or mitigate these problems, and ways people have evaluated the success of these attempts to solve environmental issues.

Course Considerations

Although the course is called urban environmental issues, the readings will sometimes go beyond environmental problems because they are intricately interlinked with social, economic, and political issues. This course is also not just about the environment in urban areas – it is about the place of nature in a human-dominated world.

This course is part of the Community Development program and University Studies Community Studies, Environmental Sustainability, Design Thinking/Innovation/Entrepreneurship (D-TIE), and Healthy People/Places clusters.

Learning Goals

As a UNST cluster course, this course is designed to meet the four general education requirements of the University Studies program, which include: Communication (1); Inquiry & Critical Thinking (2); Diversity, Equity, & Social Justice (3), and Ethics, Agency & Community (4). Specific learning objectives are related to these gen ed requirements are:

- Broaden the way students think about the environment and cities and think critically about how concepts such as “urban” and “nature” are defined and operationalized (2)

- Explore and question various oppositions, such as urban/rural and global/local: where do humans fit into nature? Are cities un-natural? How do unseen global forces affect local processes? (2)
- Understand the interconnections between the social, technological, and ecological dimensions of urban areas (2, 3)
- Understand how humans relate to and treat nature in an urbanizing world, especially in consideration of racial, economic, and gendered differences (2, 3)
- Enhance critical thinking skills. Students will need to learn to “look behind the curtain” and ask “for whom” questions in order to be successful (2, 3, 4)
- Consider which groups of people are most affected by various urban and environmental issues (3, 4)
- Confront “climate dread” and think differently about climate-changed future cities (2)
- Work with groups and participate in a discussion-based classroom setting (1)
- Develop research, communication, and planning strategies and convey knowledge and ideas clearly in written and verbal form (1)

READINGS & ASSIGNMENTS

There’s no required text for this class, i.e., nothing to buy. All readings are available as links or PDFs on Canvas. I have increasingly been running into issues with paywalls; if you encounter a paywall, please contact me and I’ll find a way around it.

As this class is structured around weekly readings, you’ll be required to *complete all the reading ahead of each class*. In order to receive full credit, you will be expected to participate in class discussions about the reading. I spend a great deal of time finding readings that are challenging and insightful without being overly dense or absurdly long, so read them carefully and critically. In general, I try to aim for about 2 hours of reading/viewing for each class meeting, but some will require more, and some less.

❖ Participation and Attendance (20%)

Attendance means showing up for class – show up and get points! You are entitled to 2 “freebies” (does not apply to the class debate during week 3), but after that unexcused absences will affect your grade. That said, I am reasonable; please contact me if special accommodations need to be made. And if you are sick, please stay home – keep in mind illnesses like covid can have serious impacts on immunocompromised people.

Participation includes showing up (on time), taking part in class discussions, paying attention during lectures and when other students are talking, and being respectful in your comments. We use the course’s assigned readings/videos to organize our in-class activities, so showing up prepared is essential.

❖ Weekly Discussion Posts (2% weekly; 20% total)

Each week students will submit a discussion post to Canvas and then reply to two classmates:

- Discussion posts should be roughly one paragraph (~150-250 words). Discussion posts are due **Friday at 11:59PM** each week. Your initial post should simply be a general reaction to the week’s materials. Think of it as answering the prompt: “what stuck out to you this week and why?”
- You will be responsible for responding to two classmates’ posts before **Sunday at 11:59PM** each week– make sure to be respectful, constructive, and mindful of your own positionality (for example, avoiding the “royal we”) in your responses.
- When the week ends (11:59PM on Sunday) the discussion folder closes. This is a “show up” assignment, so plan accordingly – no make ups or extensions!

❖ **Class Debate/Reflection Essay (10%)**

On the Wednesday of week 3, we will have a class debate about the role of capitalism in remedying climate change and its effects (**please note, attendance is required for this class, i.e., no “freebies” for this one! If you are sick or must miss class, please communicate with me).

Instructions:

- First, summarize the in-class debate (students often forget to do this!)
- Second, reflect on these questions:
 - What did you find compelling? Which arguments resonated with you and which positions did you find most convincing?
 - Provide at least one quote (paraphrasing is fine) from the debate to help make your point
 - Did anything you heard, watched, or read change your mind in any way? If so, how? If not, why?
 - Do you feel there were any omissions in the debate? In other words, were there points that were not discussed that you feel were important?
- Third, provide 3 sources that helped shape your opinion ahead of the debate (I’m not picky about citation style; any is fine, as long as I can access the source)
- Reflections should be ~400-500 words and are due Wednesday of week 4 at 11:59PM.

❖ **“Praxis” Paper (20%):**

For the praxis assignment, you will pick a current events news article and apply a framework to the issue it describes. Be sure to use a trustworthy source for your article (most major newspapers are OK). Also be sure your article is *not* an opinion or position piece – you need to be able to formulate your own opinion and analysis. Lastly, be sure that your article describes an issue that is urban and environmental. Your article does *not* need to be long, dense, and/or academic, just objective and informative.

- You must use one – not both – framework reading: either The Conundrum of Urban Sustainability or Reconciling the Green and Brown Agendas (both reading in **bold** on the class schedule below)
- The paper should be 4 paragraphs, no more or less; instructions are below:
 - The first paragraph should be a descriptive and concise summary of the issue from the article you selected; what are the critical points of the issue?
 - The second paragraph should describe the framework you have chosen: What are the important elements and keyword of the framework?
 - The third paragraph should apply the framework to the issue you have chosen; how do the elements of the framework fit your issue?
 - The fourth paragraph should be an analytical paragraph that draws a lesson or suggests a solution; what new insights can be drawn from using the framework to think through your issue? Do any solutions become clear?
 - AI use is not allowed – AI-generated essays will receive a zero
 - Papers are due to Canvas end of week 6 (Sunday at 11:59PM)

❖ **Group project – Urban Climate Futures or Policy Brief (30%)**

For the term project, you will work with a group on an urban climate futures project (based on a “solarpunk” card game) or a policy brief that analyzes an urban issue and proposes a policy solution. Students that want practice in the realm of policy research and writing might choose the policy brief; students that want practice imagining what cities might be like after systemic transformation might choose the urban climate futures project.

Each group will prepare a presentation for the class to be given during week 10 (and perhaps finals week...TBD). Groups will be determined in week 5 or 6 based on how many students want to work on each project, and you will have time in class to work with your group. We will likely conduct a peer review in week 9 (but stay tuned). The peer review will be informal and is meant to help groups tighten their presentations.

Once your group has completed your presentation, you will need to upload your slide deck (or alternative format if you use one) to Canvas. Detailed instructions for each project will be posted in the Syllabus module on Canvas, and we will discuss the project further in class.

Grading Policy

Unless otherwise noted, my general grading policy will follow Prof. Bates’s philosophy on evaluating student work:

- An A assignment demonstrates original thought and synthesis of ideas, sophisticated, cogent analysis, and is clearly written or presented. Outstanding work.
- A B assignment presents above average analysis with appropriate evidence to support the ideas and is clearly written or presented. Very good work.
- A C assignment shows a basic level of understanding, with analysis limited to the most obvious arguments. Writing is competent. Adequate work.
- A D assignment misunderstands or misrepresents the material or is so poorly written or presented as to obscure the analysis. Inadequate work.

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CLASS SCHEDULE

Date	Weekly Themes & Readings	Assignments
3/30	<i>Course Introduction</i>	
4/1	<i>Situating and (Re)framing: Urbanization and the Climate</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: IPCC Report Headlines (WG1 & WG 2) • Read/Check Out: State of the Climate 2024 • Check Out: Climate Clock (climateclock.world) • Read: Sun, Climate Migration Pushes Bangladesh’s Megacity [...] • Watch: The Recipe for a Good Anthropocene • Read: Solnit & Latunatabua, Difficult is not the Same as Impossible & Nothing is Inevitable 	Discussion Post
Part I: History and Theory		
4/6	<i>Land & Urban Development</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Girardet, Agropolis • Read: Cronon, Dreaming the Metropolis • Watch: Imagining Decolonized Cities 	
4/8	<i>Industrialization</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Girardet, Petropolis • Read: Malm, The Anthropocene Myth 	Discussion Post
4/13	<i>Globalization</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Davis, The Urban Climacteric [Excerpt] & Slum Ecology 	

4/15	<i>Capitalism and Climate Change: A Debate</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Cronon, Ch 4 (only first section, pgs. 148-151) • Do outside research on the relationship between capitalism and climate change; bring sources to class and we'll debate 	Discussion Post
4/20	<i>Urban Metabolism 1: Transforming Nature</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Grinsell, The City is a Lie • Read: Wachsmuth, Three Ecologies (Read pgs. 506-510; skim through the rest) 	
4/22	<i>Urban Metabolism 2: The Global Hinterlands</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Rees, The Conundrum of Urban Sustainability • Read: The Dark Side of Congo's Cobalt Rush 	Discussion Post Debate Reflection
4/27	<i>Environmental Justice 1: Environmental Racism</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Pulido, Rethinking Environmental Racism (pgs. 12-19) • Read: The Poisoned Generation • Read: How Decades of Housing Policy Left Neighborhoods Sweltering 	
4/29	<i>Environmental Justice 2: Reconciling Equitable Approaches</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Brown/Green Agenda • Read: Contesting Sustainability 	Discussion Post
Part II: Urban Environments of the Present		
5/4	<i>"Natural" Disasters & Adaptation</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: There's No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster • Watch: No Man's Land: Barbuda After Irma • Read: Adaptation • Watch: Billie Eilish and 8 Climate Activists Get Real About Our Planet 	
5/6	<i>Water & Waste</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Troy, Thirsty City • Watch: The Only State Capital Where You Can't Drink the Water • Read: 'Waste Colonialism' • Read: Is Recycling Plastic Actually Useless? 	Discussion Post "Praxis" Paper
5/11	<i>Transportation</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Why Did America Give Up on Mass Transit? • Read: Schneider, The Big Deal Breaks Down 	
5/13	<i>Urban Agriculture/Food Sovereignty</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: How Do People in a Food Desert Feed Themselves [...] • Read: Empty Office Buildings Are Being Turned Into Vertical Farms • Read: The People Building Edible Cities 	Discussion Post
Part III: (Re)Building the Future		

5/18	<i>Confronting the Future</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Albrecht, Solastalgia • Read: Climate Despair • Read: Packing (and Unpacking) for an Emergency 	
5/20	<i>Degrowth & Solarpunk</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: 'These Ideas are Incredibly Popular': What is Degrowth? • Read: Degrowth and the City • Read: Solarpunk Cities: Notes Toward a Manifesto • Watch: What If the Future Is Awesome? • Read: Community Economy 	Discussion Post
5/25	Memorial Day – No class	
5/27	<i>Alternative Urban Visions</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Library Socialism 101 • Read: Auken, Welcome to 2030. I own nothing [...] • Read: Nugent, Amsterdam is Embracing a Radical New Economic Theory [...] 	Discussion Post Peer Review?
6/1	<i>Just Solutions & Imagining Different Cities</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: Feed What You Want to Grow 	Presentations?
6/3	<i>Just Solutions & Imagining Different Cities</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read: How NW Communities Are Stopping Fossil Fuel Projects • Read: PCEF to invest \$92 million in community-led grants • Read: 'Greenway Stimulus' Could Bring Boom • Read: A Guide to Climate Reparations 	Discussion Post Presentations?
6/8	Finals Week	Presentations?

****Course schedule subject to changes. I will announce any major changes in class**

POLICIES & RESOURCES

Classroom Etiquette

It is important to follow a few simple rules of classroom courtesy. While I realize laptops are an essential learning/note taking tool, I ask that you use it exclusively for note taking and for exploring issues that come up in class (i.e. not browsing/scrolling social media). And please be on time to class. Repeated lateness (or early exits) will impact your participation grade.

Policy on Academic Integrity

PSU takes academic integrity very seriously. As a PSU student, you are expected to adhere to the PSU Student Code of Conduct (see: <https://www.pdx.edu/dos/psu-student-code-conduct>). Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. The PSU Student Code of Conduct defines academic misconduct as follows:

(9) Academic Misconduct. Academic Misconduct is defined as, actual or attempted, fraud, deceit, or unauthorized use of materials prohibited or inappropriate in the context of the academic assignment. Unless otherwise specified by the faculty member, all

submissions, whether in draft or final form, must either be the Student's own work, or must clearly acknowledge the source(s). Academic Misconduct includes, but is not limited to: (a) cheating, (b) fraud, (c) plagiarism, such as word for word copying, using borrowed words or phrases from original text into new patterns without attribution, or paraphrasing another writer's ideas; (d) the buying or selling of all or any portion of course assignments and research papers; (e) performing academic assignments (including tests and examinations) in another person's stead; (f) unauthorized disclosure or receipt of academic information; (g) falsification of research data (h) unauthorized collaboration; (i) using the same paper or data for several assignments or courses without proper documentation; (j) unauthorized alteration of student records; and (k) academic sabotage, including destroying or obstructing another student's work.

Students are responsible for knowing both in-class behavior and rules governing use of materials in academic work. Plagiarism includes both other students' work and/or anything from the internet (including Wikipedia) that is not properly cited. Any student found plagiarizing work or violating any part of PSU's academic integrity policy will receive no credit for the assignment and will not receive an opportunity to make up the work.

Using AI in this Course

Intellectual integrity forms the bedrock of academic communities and serves as the cornerstone for impartial evaluation of your work. All coursework completed and/or submitted for this course must represent your original work and adhere to the University's Academic Integrity Guidelines. Unauthorized collaboration or the use of ChatGPT or any other generative AI applications is strictly prohibited.

Canvas Web-based Course Management

We will be using Canvas in this course including: access to and updates to the syllabus/reading assignments and assignment submissions. There will be a learning curve we are transition from D2L to Canvas, so let's all do our best and be understanding when there are challenges.

Student Resources

Access and Inclusion for Students with Disabilities. PSU values diversity and inclusion; we are committed to fostering mutual respect and full participation for all students. My goal is to create a learning environment that is equitable, useable, inclusive, and welcoming. If any aspects of instruction or course design result in barriers to your inclusion or learning, please notify me. The Disability Resource Center (DRC) provides reasonable accommodations for students who encounter barriers in the learning environment. If you have, or think you may have, a disability that may affect your work in this class and feel you need accommodations, contact the Disability Resource Center to schedule an appointment and initiate a conversation about reasonable accommodations. Call 503-725-4150 or email drc@pdx.edu. The DRC website is <https://www.pdx.edu/drc>. If you already have accommodations, please contact me to make sure that I have received a faculty notification letter and discuss your accommodations.

Title IX. Portland State is committed to providing an environment free of all forms of prohibited discrimination and sexual harassment (sexual assault, domestic and dating violence, and gender or sex-based harassment and stalking). If you have experienced any form of gender or sex-based discrimination or sexual harassment, know that help and support are available. Information about PSU's support services on campus, including confidential services and reporting options, can be found on PSU's Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response website at: <http://www.pdx.edu/sexual-assault/get-help> or you may call a confidential IPV Advocate at 503-725-5672 or schedule Online at <https://psuwrp.youcanbook.me>. You may report any incident of discrimination or discriminatory harassment, including sexual harassment, to:

- PSU's Title IX Coordinator: Julie Caron by calling 503-725-4410, via email at titleixcoordinator@pdx.edu or in person at Richard and Maureen Neuberger Center (RMNC), 1600 SW 4th Ave, Suite 830
- Deputy Title IX Coordinator: Yesenia Gutierrez by calling 503-725-4413, via email at yesenia.gutierrez.gdi@pdx.edu or in person at RMNC, 1600 SW 4th Ave, Suite 830

Please be aware that all PSU faculty members and instructors are required to report information of an incident that may constitute prohibited discrimination, including sexual harassment and sexual violence. This means that if you tell me about a situation of sexual harassment or sexual violence that may have violated university policy or student code of conduct, I have to share the information with my supervisor, the University's Title IX Coordinator or the Office of the Dean of Student Life. However, the Title IX Coordinators will keep the information confidential and refer you to a confidential advocate. For more information about Title IX please complete the required student module *Creating a Safe Campus* in your D2L.

Other resources you should know about:

- For information on assistance with food, housing, financial, utility, and childcare, please visit: <https://www.pdx.edu/dos/student-resources>
- The Office of Diversity & Multicultural Student Services (Smith Memorial Union 425) provides structured, academic support service, advising, referrals, and advocacy for first-generation college students, low-income and others facing special challenges. Please visit: <https://www.pdx.edu/diversity-multicultural-student-services/>
- The Learning Center (Millar Library 245) mission is to foster the learning process by empowering PSU students to accomplish their academic and personal goals. In addition to helping with current coursework, academic support services can assist in developing effective learning strategies. <http://www.pdx.edu/tutoring/>
- The Writing Center (Cramer 188) will help you with all varieties of projects, including class assignments, resumes, application essays, presentations, and creative writing. It aims to help writers at any stage of the writing process, from brainstorming to the final draft. You can schedule an appointment online and their website also suggests ideas and strategies for completing writing assignments. <http://www.writingcenter.pdx.edu/>
- It can be challenging to do your best in class if you have trouble meeting basic needs like safe shelter, sleep, and nutrition. Resource centers across campus are here to provide assistance, referrals, and support. Please contact anyone on this list for assistance:
 - Basic Needs Hub: basicneedshub@pdx.edu
 - Portland State Food Pantry: psufp.com; pantry@pdx.edu
 - C.A.R.E. Team: askdos@pdx.edu; (503) 725-4422
 - Student Health and Counseling: askshac@pdx.edu; (503) 725-2800