

**Course:** USP 413/513 Public Space  
**Term:** Spring 2026  
**Credits:** 4  
**Instructor:** Matthew Gebhardt  
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## Course Description

An introduction to the study of public spaces in American cities, with a special focus on Portland. Key readings include history and theory of concepts of public space, as well as contemporary case studies and field assignments to understand the production and maintenance of public spaces in and around Portland.

This course explores what it means for spaces to be designated as “public”, particularly in the urban environment, including parks and plazas, streets and sidewalks, and schools and libraries. We will also consider where spaces such as coffee shops, parking lots, malls, atriums, and pathways. We will examine contemporary issues and practices in the production and use of public space and the implications of these for public policy and planning.

We will consider the economic, social, political and cultural ideas that surround the concept of being a public and being in public and the ways these are play out spatially in various spaces. We will consider who *counts* as a member of “the public” in different times and places; the idea of multiple publics, and counter-publics; and how these various groups interact in the contests over how public space is funded, designed, managed and maintained. In turn, we will ask who is included and excluded in both the design and everyday use of public spaces. We will think about how different configurations of the public and public space relate to the State, in a democracy and under capitalism.

We will examine the contemporary literature in urban planning as well as a variety of social science disciplines in order to become more articulate in our descriptions

and classifications of public space. And we will gain empirical knowledge by exploring the city on foot both during class time and in independent assignments, honing our powers of observation to see how the design and character of places operate as public.

## Learning Outcomes

A student who successfully completes this class will be able to:

- Describe what makes a place public (or not) in terms of access, use, ownership, governance, and distribution;
- Discuss the role that public space plays in the structure and function of urban areas and their importance to civil society, engagement, and equity;
- Observe, analyze, assess, and classify public spaces and their constituent design elements;
- Apply urban design concepts and placemaking principles to public spaces to develop recommended improvements;
- Practice visual, graphic, and spatial literacy.

## Teaching Methods

This course is taught through a twice weekly seminar format where we will actively discuss concepts from readings and other materials related to course topics. This course may also involve site visits, walking/rolling tours, and in-person observation.

## Texts and Readings

There are no required texts for this course. Instead, readings and other resources will be made available online either through the University Library's website or other sources. **Note: please regularly check the online version of the syllabus and reading list as readings may change or new readings or resources may be added during the term.**

## Assignments and Grading

Your course grade will be based on the assignments and examinations listed below. Each will be graded on a 100-point basis, weighted for your final grade by the percentages listed next to the item. For a variety of reasons, including a desire to reduce paper, all assignments will be submitted online, through which you will also receive your grades and feedback.

• Assignment 1: Observations, Reflections, and Participation	20
• Assignment 2: Public Space Assessment and Classification	20
• Assignment 3: Public Space Precedent	20
• Assignment 4: Public Space Intervention Strategy	45
• Total	<u>100</u>

The basic rubric used to grade graduate-student work is as follows:

- A: Demonstrates original thought and synthesis of ideas, sophisticated, cogent analysis, and is clearly written or presented. Excellent work.
- A- or B+: Presents above average analysis with appropriate evidence to support the ideas and is clearly written or presented. Good work.
- B or B-: Shows a basic level of understanding, with analysis limited to the most obvious arguments. Writing is competent. Adequate work.
- C+ or below: Misunderstands or misrepresents the material, or is so poorly written presented as to obscure the analysis. Inadequate work for a graduate-level course.

*The following represent summaries of the assignments; further guidance and detailed instructions about the four assignments will be provided in class and via Canvas.*

### **Assignment 1: Observations, Reflections, and Participation (20%)**

Purpose: This assignment affords the opportunity to actively engage with the concepts, materials, and spaces we are exploring.

Task: For this assignment you will complete in-person or online activities associated with the topics covered in a particular session, e.g., notes on your observations from a site visit, a short reflection on a week’s readings.

### **Assignment 2: Public Space Assessment and Classification (20%)**

Purpose: To deploy public space and urban design concepts to understand a public space in Portland.

Task: For this assignment you will use concepts drawn from literature on urban design to analyze a public space and place it within a classification based on this analysis.

### **Assignment 3: Public Space Precedent (20%)**

Purpose: This assignment will allow you to explore and draw inspiration from high quality public spaces around the world.

Task: For this assignment you will research examples of high-quality public spaces outside of Portland that illustrate qualities and characteristics you identify as desirable. You will share these with the class as a case study slide show.

### **Assignment 4: Public Space Design Context and Recommendations (45%)**

Purpose: This assignment asks you to conduct an issues and forces assessment of a public space. Based on this assessment, students will recommend an approach to redesign this space and a temporary activation or intervention to demonstrate feasibility.

Task: For this assignment you will create an illustrated issues and forces map of a public space in need of rethinking. Using this map, you will identify a strategy for tactical/temporary interventions in this space.

Note: A potential alternative of a public space activation may be offered.

**Late Assignments:** Late assignments create a variety of issues related to equity, pedagogy and integrity. Please try to avoid them if at all possible, but extensions will be granted where circumstances merit. Communication is important, so please try to let me know in advance if you believe you will need an extension.

**Academic Integrity:** All work done for the course must be your own. The work must be original and prepared for this class. Plagiarism is unacceptable. Copying the work of another and not citing it; lifting text from the Internet; or even presenting ideas that are not your own without proper attribution are all examples of plagiarism. Use of Generative AI must be clearly labeled and students are fully responsible for the content and its accuracy.

## **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. The DRC can be contacted at: 503-725-4150, [drc@pdx.edu](mailto:drc@pdx.edu), <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.

## **Sexual Assault and Harassment**

As an instructor, one of my responsibilities is to help create a safe learning environment for my students and for the campus as a whole. I take this responsibility very seriously, and I expect a culture of professionalism and mutual respect in our department and class. You may report any incident of discrimination or discriminatory harassment, including sexual harassment, to either the Office of Equity and Compliance (<https://www.pdx.edu/diversity/office-of-equity-compliance>) or the Office of the Dean of Student Life (<https://www.pdx.edu/dos/student-conduct-at-psu>).

PSU's Student Code of Conduct (<https://www.pdx.edu/dos/psu-student-code-conduct>) makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender are strictly prohibited and offenses are subject to the full realm of sanctions. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you can find resources on PSU's Enrollment Management & Student Affairs: Sexual Prevention & Response website at <http://www.pdx.edu/sexual-assault>.

Please be aware that as a faculty member, I have the responsibility to report any instances of sexual harassment, sexual violence and/or other forms of prohibited discrimination. If you would rather share information about sexual harassment or sexual violence to a confidential employee who does not have this reporting responsibility, you can find a list of those individuals here: <https://www.pdx.edu/sexual-assault/get-help>. For more information about Title IX

please complete the required student module Creating a Safe Campus in your D2L or find more information about it here: <https://www.pdx.edu/sexual-assault/safe-campus-module>.

## **Other Campus Resources**

The PSU Food Pantry offers supplemental food items to currently enrolled PSU students. The pantry is located in SMSU 325. For more information, you can email [foodhelp@pdx.edu](mailto:foodhelp@pdx.edu). For more information on food and wellness assistance for students visit: <https://www.pdx.edu/student-access-center/>.

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. Visit <http://www.pdx.edu/dmss/> for info.

Services are available for students with children, including childcare subsidies and family events, a lending library and clothing closet, lactation spaces, and a Family Resource Room. More information can be found at: <https://www.pdx.edu/students-with-children/our-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. See <http://www.pdx.edu/tutoring/> for more info.

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: <http://www.writingcenter.pdx.edu/>. Their website also contains resource pages that suggest ideas and strategies for completing writing projects.

Student Legal Services provides legal advice and assistance on a range of areas of law including family, landlord-tenant, and immigration. More information can be found at: <https://www.pdx.edu/sls>.

## Course Outline

Below is an evolving list of topics that are planned for inclusion in the course. It is subject to revision, and the exact schedule and groupings is not set. Each week will cover a cluster of topics supported by 2-3 weekly readings, videos, and/or additional resources.

<b>Week</b>	<b>Topic</b>
Week 1	Introductions and Concepts; Histories of Public Space
Week 2	Observation, Evaluation, and Classification
Week 3	Lost and Found Space
Week 4	Functionalism
Week 5	Aesthetics
Week 6	Sense of Place, Production of Space
Week 7	Identity and Quality
Week 8	Style and Authenticity
Week 9	Public Sphere and Right to the City
Week 10	Wrap Up