Expository Writing 20: City Living

Course Description
Where to live is the most important decision of your life, according to urban planner and theorist Richard Florida. Cities are where innovation meets inequality, the old is pitted against the new, where cultural richness and diversity confront gentrification and displacement. Starting with the candid and revelatory photography of Vivian Maier, we will ask how the design of neighborhoods and streets shapes the social life that goes on there. Cities are places of maximum possible anonymity and maximum possible community: we will ask how urban theorists have explained that paradox. We will explore projects for the utopian City of Tomorrow and grassroots movements to retake control over city streets. Later, we’ll read classic manifestos and analyses from Le Corbusier, Jane Jacobs, and Mike Davis alongside contemporary arguments. In the final unit of this course, students will choose a work of urban art (a film, a TV series, a novel, or poetry collection) and, placing it into conversation with other research, make an argument about that work’s conception of city living. Over the course of the semester, we will consider questions such as: Is city living a necessary evil or an aspirational lifestyle? Are cities sustainable in the face of climate change and remote work? How do the boundaries of neighborhoods and school districts shape economic and racial disparities? Should cities follow an orderly plan or develop organically? How should cities remember their pasts or imagine their futures?
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Works Studied:  
Street photography by Vivian Maier  
*The City of To-Morrow and Its Planning* by Le Corbusier  
*The Death and Life of American Cities* by Jane Jacobs  
*City of Quartz* by Mike Davis  
*Relations in Public* by Erving Goffman  
“The Metropolis and Mental Life” by Georg Simmel  
“The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space” by Mary Douglas

Unit 3 Options:  
*Roma* directed by Alfonso Cuarón  
*The Apartment* directed by Billy Wilder  
*Open City* by Teju Cole  
*A Street in Bronzeville* by Gwendolyn Brooks  
*The Wire* (season 1) created by David Simon

**Unit 1**  
Street Photography by Vivian Maier ([http://www.vivianmaier.com/gallery](http://www.vivianmaier.com/gallery))  
Sparking text: *Relations in Public* (excerpt) by Erving Goffman

> …the individual makes himself into something that others can read and predict from; by employing this device at proper strategic junctures—ones where his indicated course will be perceived as a promise or warning or threat but not as a challenge—he becomes something to which they can adapt without loss of self-respect. – Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public*

For your first essay, you will make an original argument about the way the built environment, (the elements of the landscape shaped by humans) shapes social interaction in the street photography of Vivian Maier. This essay asks you to reflect on the way manmade features (like stoops, roads, fences, etc.) affect the kinds of relations people have in the urban environment. Your essay should analyze the evidence in at least three photographs (though you may choose to consider more).

**Unit 2**  
*The City of To-Morrow and Its Planning* by Le Corbusier (excerpt)  
“Fortress L.A.” by Mike Davis (from *City of Quartz*)  
“The Kind of Problem a City Is” by Jane Jacobs (from *The Death and Life of American Cities*)

For Essay 2, write a 5-7 page comparative analysis of two of the central texts in this unit. All three texts deal with the question of how urban space should be organized—and who should be in charge of that organization.

Le Corbusier argues that cities should be designed like a well-constructed machine: distinct functions (housing, office work, transportation, manufacturing, etc.) should be kept separate to allow the whole to function more logically and efficiently. For Jacobs, the organization of a city should emerge organically from the various kinds of street life and neighborhoods that make it
up. Davis argues that that American cities public spaces are increasingly privatized, and increasingly hostile to poor people.

As with Paper 1, this essay should be guided by a clear, specific and arguable thesis grounded in the analysis of evidence. Unlike Paper 1, you will develop your own argument through evaluating the arguments of other writers. The goal of your comparative analysis is to uncover something you would not have seen if you had looked at each text in isolation.

Unit 3
In this unit, you will have the opportunity to select a work of art (a film, a novel, or a poetry collection) and, placing it into conversation with other research, make an argument about that work’s conception of city living.

Your paper will focus on one of the following works:

- Roma directed by Alfonso Cuarón
- The Apartment directed by Billy Wilder
- Open City by Teju Cole
- A Street in Bronzeville by Gwendolyn Brooks
- The Wire (season 1) created by David Simon

Essay 3 will place your chosen work in a well-chosen context and contribute meaningfully to the scholarly conversation about it. Your context might be critical, historical, theoretical, or some combination of the three. In every instance, the context should serve your thesis.