

## Advanced Topics in Urban Sociology: Urban Public Spaces

SOC486H1F - L5101

Fall 2025

Meeting Time: Wednesday 5:10 PM – 7:00 PM

Location: Check ACORN

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### **Instructor: Olimpia Bidian**

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Office Hours: Scheduled as needed

*“It is difficult to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished”.*

*William H. Whyte, The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces (1980)*

The prerequisite to take SOC486H1F – L5101 is 1.0 SOC FCE at the 300+ level. Students without the prerequisite will be removed from the course without notice.

### **Introduction**

Urban public space is not just the green park with broad walkways and comfortable benches designed for quiet strolls and passive leisure, the impressive plaza fronting an equally impressive governmental building, the manicured lawn wrapped around a statue, or leftover parkette squeezed between buildings. Public space is the thread that binds a city’s social life providing the quintessential stage where strangers meet, where stories are told, where democracy can show up without invitation. This is especially true within contemporary urban contexts where cities expand, populations grow, and land use patterns shift. Whether they are expansive parks or parkettes, plazas, squares, boardwalks, or narrow sidewalks, these are the spaces where urban planning and development policies, political and economic priorities, and social needs and expectations intersect and interact, often in full view. As such, public spaces are both the mirrors and makers of these changes and their role in daily urban life that tell us important stories about whose voices are heard, who belongs and who does not, who decides and why, and what kind of city we are building together.

### **Course Description**

In this course we will explore the interplay between governmental agencies and urban planning policies, privatization and commercialization, gentrification, surveillance and exclusionary practices, and grassroots and community driven placemaking, and the resulting impact on the physical and social life

of urban public spaces. To set a solid foundation for understanding of these ongoing dynamics, in the first part of the course we will discuss public space definitions, patterns, and dominant theoretical perspectives such as placemaking, neoliberalism, and gentrification, alongside evolving critiques. In the latter part, we will turn our focus toward some of the most pressing contemporary public space debates such as green gentrification, surveillance, homelessness and public health. Ultimately, the aim is for us to analyze and understand public spaces not as static urban backdrops, but as dynamic social, political, and economic forces, and as spaces to whose form, function, and social life we all contribute, often without realizing it.

**Required and Supplemental Texts:**

All required and supplemental readings for this course can be downloaded from the class web page. Due to copyright restrictions, you must login to access them. Most of the readings are in PDF format. Readings listed as “supplemental” or “further reading” are optional, meaning they are not required. It is important to complete all required readings and attend each class.

**Grading Rationale & Course Evaluations:**

Grades will be assigned according to the University's grading criteria, which you can review here: [University of Toronto Grading Policy](#).

Final grades in this course will be based on four distinct areas of assessment, designed to offer a well-rounded opportunity for you to engage and demonstrate your strengths across multiple dimensions of learning and assignments. The following list depicts the marking breakdown:

<b>Mode of evaluation</b>	<b>Assignments deadline</b>	<b>Weight in final grade</b>
Public Space Research Exercises 1	September 16, 2025, by 11:59 PM	10%
Public Space Research Exercises 2	September 23, 2025, by 11:59 PM	10%
Public Space Research Exercises 3	September 30, 2025, by 11:59 PM	10%
Public Space Research Exercises 4	October 14, 2025, by 11:59 PM	10%
Public Space Research Exercises 5	November 04, 2025, by 11:59 PM	10%
Final Paper	November 25, 2025, by 11:59 PM	30%
Critical Reflection	November 28, 2025, by 11:59 PM	10%
Class Participation	Ongoing	10%

### ***I. Public Space Research Exercises (5 x 10% Each) - 50%***

Throughout the course, you will complete five short Public Space Research Exercises, each focused on a different lens through which you can examine one of Toronto's public spaces. These assignments are designed to help you collect and analyze ethnographic data and to apply course theories to the study of urban contexts in a structured and data-driven manner. Together, these assignments will also form the foundation for your Final Paper. **Each Public Space Research Exercise is Due by 11:59 PM the day before class** thus giving us the opportunity to discuss them in class.

### ***II. Final Paper - 30%***

The Final Paper requires you to integrate course literature, theoretical frameworks, and your case study insights into an original and insightful critical analysis of your chosen public space. To accomplish this, build from the findings and arguments developed in your Public Space Research Exercises, you will conduct a focused literature review and engage with relevant course theoretical perspectives, concepts, or ideas to present an insightful analysis of your case study. **Due on November 25, 2025, by 11:59 PM.**

### ***III. Critical Reflection - 10%***

This final assignment serves as a take-home assessment, designed to give you the opportunity to demonstrate your ability to critically engage with the themes and concepts covered in the course in a original and insightful manner. You will receive the reflection prompt in the final week of the course and have three days to complete it. **Due on November 28, 2025, by 11:59 PM.**

### ***IV. Class Participation - 10%***

This course is structured as a seminar, and as such, your consistent presence and meaningful engagement during each class are essential for its success. Therefore, you are encouraged to connect weekly readings to your chosen case study and to help advance the conversation by drawing links between theory and lived urban public experience, either from your own projects or other relevant literature. Meaningful engagement also means helping to create a collaborative, supportive, and respectful learning environment. To help create such an environment, your engagement with your peers' project and ideas is both expected and valued.

### **Email and the Course Webpage:**

In this course, the use of e-mail and the ability to access the course webpage are important. I will use e-mail for reminders, clarifications, last-minute notifications, etc. Feel free to contact me via e-mail with questions, requests or problems that were not, or could not, be addressed in class.

**Note:** all e-mail correspondence must be conducted via the University of Toronto's e-mail only and will be answered within 48 business hours from time of reception barring any complications of which you will have due notice. Please indicate the course code (SOC486H1F) in the subject line. E-mails received from other accounts (e.g. @hotmail, @gmail, @live account) will not be answered.

### **Missing Deadlines/Submitting Late Work:**

Please note that late submissions for Public Space Research Exercises **will not be accepted** under any circumstances. These assignments are designed to keep you engaged with the course material on a regular basis, and timely submission is crucial for participation and feedback purposes. Please plan accordingly to ensure your exercises are submitted on time.

Students who miss the Final Paper or the Critical Reflection deadline will receive a mark of zero for that paper unless the reason is a circumstance beyond their control. **Within three days** of missing a paper deadline, students must send the instructor a request for consideration. Students must document their request with **one of the following**:

- Absence declaration via ACORN (**can only be used once during the semester**)
- U of T Verification of Illness or Injury Form
- College Registrar's letter (e.g., in case of personal/family crisis or emergency)
- Letter of Academic Accommodation from Accessibility Services

Students who miss the test or are late in submitting an assignment for other reasons, such as family or other personal reasons, should request their College Registrar to email the instructor.

### **The University's Plagiarism Detection Tool - Turnitin:**

Students agree that by taking this course all required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to Turnitin.com for the detection of plagiarism. All submitted papers will be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of such papers. The terms that apply to the University's use of the Turnitin.com service is described on the Turnitin.com web site.

Assignments not submitted through *Turnitin* will receive a grade of zero (0 %), unless a student instead provides, along with their assignment, sufficient secondary material (e.g., reading notes, outlines of the paper, rough drafts of the final draft, etc.) to establish that the paper they submit is truly their own. The alternative (not submitting via Turnitin) is in place because, strictly speaking, using *Turnitin* is voluntary for students at the University of Toronto

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense with serious penalties (see the Code for Behaviour on Academic Matters <https://governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/secretariat/policies/code-behaviour-academic-matters-july-1-2019>). Therefore, if you are using someone else's ideas, do not present them as your own. Instead, ensure that you always provide proper references and use quotation marks if you are quoting someone else's ideas. When in doubt, it is always safer to over-reference than plagiarize someone else's work. Also, please be aware that turning in an assignment, or large parts of an assignment written for another course for credit in a second (or third, etc.) course, is also considered an academic offence that results in students being referred off to the University's Office of Academic Integrity.

### **Use of Artificial Intelligence:**

The knowing use of generative AI tools for any purpose other than information gathering in this course will be considered a violation of academic integrity policies. This includes copying, paraphrasing, or otherwise incorporating AI-generated content into your submissions. In this course our goal is to ensure that your work reflects your own understanding and critical thinking. While generative AI may be useful for gathering background material or exploring diverse perspectives, all synthesis, argumentation, and critical interpretation must be entirely your own. Using AI to shape the structure, language, or content of your assignments undermines their originality and insightfulness. If you are unsure whether a specific use of AI is permitted for any of assignments, please speak with me in advance. Also, for more on the University's position on generative AI, please see UofT's AI Task Force Report: <https://ai.utoronto.ca/u-of-t-ai-task-force/report/>

### **Accessibility Needs:**

The University of Toronto is committed to accessibility. If you require accommodations for a disability, or have accessibility concerns about the course, the classroom, or course materials, please contact Accessibility services as soon as possible: [disability.sevices@utoronto.ca](mailto:disability.sevices@utoronto.ca) or <http://studentlife.utoronto.ca/accessibility>

### **Feedback on Ideas and Writing:**

I am happy to discuss your ideas and writing questions during office hours, or through email. However, more help can be provided to students who ask early. All too often, submitted papers are one or two drafts short of excellence. I also encourage you use the university's ample writing resources.

## **COURSE OUTLINE**

### **PART I: Theoretical Foundations – Defining and Explaining Urban Public Space**

#### **Week 01: September 3, 2025 – Introductory Class**

- Course introduction and brief overview of mutual expectations. No assigned readings for this week.

#### **Week 02: September 10, 2025 – What are Public Spaces? Why Do They Matter?**

##### Required Readings:

- Tuan, Yi-Fu. 1977. "Space and Place: An Overview." Pp. 3–7 in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mitchell, Don. 1995. "The End of Public Space? People's Park, Definitions of the Public, and Democracy." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 85(1):108–133.

- Low, Setha M., and Neil Smith. 2006. “The Politics of Public Space.” Pp. 1–16 in *The Politics of Public Space*, edited by S. M. Low and N. Smith. New York: Routledge.

Supplemental Readings:

- Tuan, Yi-Fu. 1977. “Architectural Space and Awareness.” Pp. 112–129 in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Low, Setha M. 2006. “The Social Production of Public Space.” Pp. 17–34 in *The Politics of Public Space*, edited by S. M. Low and N. Smith. New York: Routledge.
- Montgomery, Charles. 2014. “Convivialities.” Pp. 151–178 in *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (Note: Physical item only available at multiple UofT Library locations)

**Week 03: September 17, 2025 - Urban Governance and Public Space Stakeholders**

**\*\* Public Space Research Exercises 1: Site Description – due Tuesday, September 16, 2025, by 11:59 PM\*\***

Required Readings:

- Hannigan, John. 1998. “Introduction.” Pp. 1-11 in *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis*. London: Routledge.
- Mitchell, Don. 2003. “The End of Public Space?” Pp. 1–15 in *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*. New York: Guilford Press. (Note: Physical item only available at multiple UofT Library locations)

Supplemental Readings:

- Iveson, Kurt. 2007. *Publics and the City*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Deverteuil, Geoffrey. 2014. “Does the Punitive Need the Supportive? A Sympathetic Critique of Current Grammars of Urban Injustice.” *Antipode* 46(4), 2014-09, 874 - 893.

**Week 04: September 24, 2025 – Placemaking and the Social Production of Public Space**

**\*\* Public Space Research Exercises 2: Patterns of Use – due on September 23, 2025, by 11:59 PM\*\***

Required Readings:

- Jacobs, Jane. 1961. “Chapter 2: The Uses of Sidewalks: Safety.” Pp. 29–54 in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage Books. Pp. 149 -152 in 2016 *The City Reader*
- Whyte, William H. 1988. “The Design of Spaces.” *In City: Rediscovering the Center*. Pp. 587 - 595 in *The City Reader*

Supplemental Readings:

- Project for Public Spaces. 2004. “The Placemaking Movement.” Retrieved from <https://www.pps.org/article/2003movement>
- Montgomery, Charles. 2013. “The Broken Social Scene.” Pp. 123–150 in *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (Note: Physical item only but available at multiple UofT Library locations)

## **Week 05: October 01, 2025 – Neoliberal Urbanism and the Rise of Pseudo-Public Space**

**\*\* Public Space Research Exercises 3: Governance & Control – due on September 30, 2025, by 11:59 PM\*\***

### Required Readings:

- Hackworth, Jason. 2007. “The Public-Private Partnership” In *The Neoliberal City: Governance, Ideology, and Development in American Urbanism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Madden, David J. 2010. “Revisiting the End of Public Space: Assembling the Public in an Urban Park.” *City & Community* 9(2):187–207.

### Supplemental Readings:

- Zukin, Sharon. 2009. “Changing Landscapes of Power: Opulence and the Urge for Authenticity.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33(2):543-553.
- Kohn, Margaret. 2004. *Brave New Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space*.
- Sorkin, Michael. 1992. “See You in Disneyland.” In *Variations on a Theme Park*.

## **Week 06: October 08, 2025 – Gentrification, Displacement, and Control**

### Required Readings:

- Immergluck, Dan. 2018. “Sustainable for Whom? Green Urban Development, Environmental Gentrification, and the Atlanta Beltline.” *Urban Geography* 39(4):546–562.
- Zukin, Sharon. 2010. “Union Square and the Paradox of Public Space.” In *The Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, pp. 125–158. New York: Oxford University Press.

### Supplemental Readings:

- Rousseau, Max. 2009. “Re-Imagining the City Centre for the Middle Classes: Regeneration, Gentrification and Symbolic Policies in ‘Loser Cities’.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33(3):770–788.
- Pearsall, Hamil, and Isabelle Anguelovski. 2016. “Contesting and Resisting Environmental Gentrification: Responses to New Paradoxes and Challenges for Urban Environmental Justice.” *Sociological Research Online* 21(3).

## **Week 07: October 15, 2025 - Power, Identity, and Belonging in the Public Realm**

**\*\* Public Space Research Exercises 4: Historical & Symbolic Layers – due on October 14, 2025, by 11:59 PM\*\***

### Required Readings:

- Low, Setha M. 2009. “Claiming Space for an Engaged Anthropology: Spatial Inequality and Social Exclusion.” *American Anthropologist* 113(3):389–407.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1990. “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.” *Social Text* (25/26):56–80.

### Supplemental Readings:

- Fenster, Tovi. 2005. “The Right to the Gendered City: Different Formations of Belonging in Everyday Life.” *Journal of Gender Studies* 14(3):217–231.

- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review* 43(6):1241–1299.

**Week 08: October 22, 2025 - Fear, Surveillance, and the Privatization of Safety**

Required Readings:

- Davis, Mike. 1990. “Fortress LA.” In *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, pp. 223–263. New York: Verso.
- Flusty, Steven. 2001. “The Banality of Interdiction: Surveillance, Control and the Displacement of Diversity.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25(3):658–664.

Supplemental Readings:

- Kohn, Margaret. 2004. “The Mauling of Public Space.” Pp. 74–100 in *Brave New Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space*. New York: Routledge.
- Mitchell, Don. 2017. “People’s Park again: on the end and ends of public space.” *Environment and planning*. A, 49(3), 2017-03-01, 503 - 518.

**\*\*\* October 27 - 31, 2025: Reading Week – No Class\*\***

**PART II: Critical Issues in Contemporary Urban Public Spaces**

**Week 09: November 05, 2025 - Public Spaces in Crisis?**

**\*\* Public Space Research Exercises 5: Group & Status Differences – due on November 04, 2025, by 11:59 PM\*\***

Required Readings:

- Marcuse, Peter. 2009. “From Critical Urban Theory to the Right to the City.” *City* 13(2–3):185–197.
- Sandercock, Leonie. 2003. “Out of the Closet: The Importance of Stories and Storytelling in Planning Practice.” *Planning Theory & Practice* 4(1):11–28.
- Leitner, Helga, Eric Sheppard, and Kristin M. Sziarto. 2008. “The Spatialities of Contentious Politics.” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 33(2):157–172.

Supplemental Readings:

- Springer, Simon. 2011. “Public Space as Emancipation: Meditations on Anarchism, Radical Democracy, Neoliberalism and Violence.” *Antipode* 43(2):525–562.
- Hou, Jeffrey. 2010. “(Not) Your Everyday Public Space.” in *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*, edited by J. Hou. New York: Routledge.

**\*\*\* November 11, 2025: last day to drop Fall (F) without academic penalty\*\*\***

## **Week 10: November 12, 2025 - Homelessness, Visibility, and the Question of Belonging**

### Required Readings:

- Amster, Randall. 2003. "Patterns of Exclusion: Sanitizing Space, Criminalizing Homelessness." *Social Justice* 30(1):195–221.
- Johnsen, Sarah, Suzanne Fitzpatrick, and Beth Watts. 2018. "Homelessness and Social Control: A Typology." *Housing Studies* 33(7):1106–1126.

### Supplemental Readings:

- Roy, Ananya. 2003. "Paradigms of Propertied Citizenship: Transnational Techniques of Analysis." *Urban Affairs Review* 38(4):463–491.
- Mitchell, Don. 2003. *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*. New York: Guilford Press. Chapter 5: "No Right to the City: Anti-Homeless Campaigns." (Note: Physical item only available at multiple UofT Library locations)

## **Week 11: November 19, 2025 – Symbolism, Memory, and Spatial Storytelling**

### Required Readings:

- Hayden, Dolores. 2017. "Urban Landscape History: The Sense of Place and the Politics of Space." in *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 111 - 133.
- Zukin, Sharon. 2011. "Reconstructing the Authenticity of Place." *Theory and Society* 40(2):161-165.

### Supplemental Readings:

- Till, Karen E. 2005. "Introduction." First two chapters in *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Foote, Kenneth E. 2003. "Sanctification." Pp. 185–213 and "Erasure." Pp. 259–284 in *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*. 2nd ed. Austin: University of Texas Press.

## **Week 12: November 26, 2025 – Futures of Public Space: Reclaiming the Commons**

**\*\* Final Paper - 30% on Tuesday, November 25, 2025, by 11:59 PM \*\***

### Required Readings:

- Heller Allison and Toby Adams. 2009. "Creating Healthy Cities Through Socially Sustainable Placemaking." *Australian Planner* 46(2):18-21.
- Dempsey, Nicola and Mel Burton. 2012. "Defining Place-Keeping: The Long-Term Management of Public Spaces." *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* 11(1):11-20.

### Supplemental Readings:

- Stavrides, Stavros. 2016. "Common Space as Threshold Space." Pp. 1–26 in *Common Space: The City as Commons*. London: Zed Books.
- Hou, Jeffrey. 2010. "Conclusion: Insurgent Public Space – Reflections and Prospects." Pp. 241–248 in *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of the Contemporary City*, edited by J. Hou. New York: Routledge.

**\*\*Critical Reflection - 10% due on November 28, 2025, by 11:59 PM \*\***

**Other Course Resources:**

- City of Toronto. *Public Realm and Streetscape Manual*. <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/planning-development/>
- City of Toronto Open Data. [Homepage - City of Toronto Open Data Portal](#)
- Jane's Walk Toronto. <https://janeswalk.org>
- Park People. <https://parkpeople.ca/>
- Spacing Magazine. <https://spacing.ca/toronto>
- "There's No Place Like This Place, Anyplace" (2020) — On the Honest Ed's site and the changing face of Bloor-Bathurst.