This is a seminar about the ways that urban design contributes to the distribution of political power and resources in cities.

“Design,” in this view, is not some value-neutral aesthetic applied to efforts at urban development but is, instead, an integral part of the motives driving that development. Though many urban designers and architects often seem to regard “good design” as somehow independent from social and political factors affecting its production and use, design efforts are influenced by politics in at least two important ways. First, urban design proposals may be subject to challenge by a variety of groups during the planning process. Second, political values, whether tacit or explicit, are encoded in the resultant designs.

The class investigates the nature of the relations between built form and political purposes through close examination of a wide variety of situations where public and private sector design commissions and planning processes have been clearly motivated by political pressures, as well as situations where the political assumptions have remained more tacit. We will explore cases from both developed and developing countries.

Applying insights from architects, planners, political scientists, historians, anthropologists, and philosophers, we will analyze urban design from a variety of perspectives, including gender-based and class-based critiques. Cases discussed will include extreme examples of politically charged environments: Hitler’s megalomaniacal plan for Berlin and designs for new capital cities around the world (Washington, D.C., New Delhi, Canberra, Brasília, etc.). We will then explore less extreme settings for urban design-politics closer to home, by focusing on the origins and redevelopment of American public housing. Finally, the class will conclude with sessions exploring the design-politics urban public squares, urban security and “urban resilience”—the attempt to rebuild (socially, politically, urbanistically) following sudden disasters.

The format of the class will be part slide lecture, part discussion. Participants will be responsible for four things: 1) Completion of readings in advance of each class; 2) Involvement in seminar discussions, including at least one short presentation; 3) A short paper that uses selected readings to extract the “design-politics” of a place or project; 4) A term paper on a topic analyzing both the design and political history of an urban design intervention, to be presented during the final sessions of the class. All final papers will be due on the date of the last class, though earlier submissions are welcome.
February 3

**Introduction:** Urban “Design-Politics”: From MIT to “The Capital of the World”

February 10

**Three Perspectives on the Politics of Design**

1. Political Science: How is political power constructed through space?


2. History: How is the past manipulated to serve the present?


3. Philosophy: How is meaning conveyed?


4. Science and Technology Studies: Do Artifacts have politics?


February 18 (Monday Classes Meet on Tuesday)

**Four More Perspectives on the Politics of Design**

1. Gender Studies: How does gender affect design?


Optional:
Helen Jarvis (with Paula Kantor and Jonathan Cloke) “Homes, Jobs, Communities and Networks” in Cities and Gender (Routledge, 2009), pp. 186-215.

2. Political Economy: Who benefits from urban development?


Optional:

3. Anthropology: Whose perspective matters?


4. Geography: How does urban space affect justice?


First Paper Assigned: Due in Class March 11, but presented to the class on March 18.

February 24
The Political Extremes of Urban Design 1--
Berlin, From Pre-War to Post-Wall


Optional:


March 2
The Political Extremes of Urban Design 2--Capital Cities

Required reading:


For further Reading:
Göran Therborn, *Cities of Power* (read all of it)


March 9: **The Design-Politics of Public Squares**


Exercise 1 due, for discussion on March 16.

March 16: **Discussion of Exercise 1**

March 23: **No Class: Spring Break**

March 30: **The Design-Politics of Developing Public Housing**


April 6: The Design-Politics of Redeveloping Public Housing


April 13: The Design-Politics of Urban Security


April 20: No Class—Patriots’ Day

April 27:

**The Design-Politics of Urban Resilience**


May 4

**Student Presentations 1**

May 11

**Student Presentations 2**

Final Papers due no later than May 11
Writing Evaluation and Assistance:
The MIT Writing and Communication Center offers free one-on-one professional advice from communication experts. The WCC is staffed completely by MIT lecturers. All have advanced degrees. All are experienced college classroom teachers of communication. All are published scholars and writers. WCC lecturers have a combined 130 years’ worth of teaching here at MIT (ranging from 1 to 26 years). We work with undergraduates, graduate students, post-docs, faculty, staff, alumni, and spouses. The WCC helps everyone strategize about all types of academic and professional writing as well as oral presentations and slide design. No matter what department or discipline you are in, the WCC helps you think your way more deeply into your topic, and helps you see new implications in your data, research, and ideas. The WCC also helps with non-native speaker issues, from writing and grammar to pronunciation and conversation practice. To make an appointment, go to https://mit.mywconline.com and register with our online scheduler. The WCC is at E18-233, 50 Ames Street.

Departmental Notes on Disabilities and on Academic Misconduct:

Disabilities
If you have a documented disability, or any other problem you think may affect your ability to perform in class, please see me early in the semester so that arrangements may be made to accommodate you.

Academic Misconduct
Plagiarism and cheating are both academic crimes. Never (1) turn in an assignment that you did not write yourself, or (2) turn in an assignment for this class that you previously turned in for another class. Please see me if you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism.