On Whose Terms?
The Language of Model Cities Then and Now.

MIT 4.S26

On September 20 only: Room 4-251.
Starting September 27: Room 3-329.

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Units/Level: according to individual plan of study

Office hours by appointment

Seminar Subject, Goal and Pedagogy

In 1966, U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson proposed an experimental program to address the stark inequality between the nation's prosperous suburbs and its decaying cities. In contrast to federal urban renewal programs of the past, the "Model Cities" program proposed a "coordinated and comprehensive" approach to "improving the quality of life in cities." Instead of subsidizing "slum clearance" and new construction, which rarely benefited those who were displaced, Model Cities sought to connect housing and education, job creation and health care on the basis of "widespread citizen participation."

Model Cities enabled over 100 cities across the country to develop experimental programs to address urban inequality. Cambridge and Boston were among them, and critics remarked on Cambridge's "refreshingly offbeat" proposal that sought to "erect a battery of legal barriers against real estate speculation and insane market pressures." Across the river, Boston launched an "infill housing program" to test concrete prefabrication on small, vacant infill sites in Roxbury and Dorchester. Although Model Cities was premised on calibrating the social, economic, and physical aspects of urban life, many cities sought to challenge established notions of housing design and development, and housing would come to dominate the program's trajectory.

In 1974, President Richard Nixon terminated Model Cities, in large part due to a lack of tangible deliverables. Ever since, Model Cities has been abbreviated as a failure and has received little scholarly attention. This is striking, given that socio-economic and spatial inequality bedevil US urban development today just as they did fifty years ago.

The seminar takes the theories embedded in Model Cities as a point of departure to question what has changed, and what has remained the same between theories of urban planning and architecture then and now. What were the basic assumptions that underlay Model Cities? How did the writers of the program understand them, how did the municipal politicians who responded interpret them, and how did the residents who got involved do so? How have these assumptions changed, or not, fifty years later? What are the implications of using the same terminology across place and time?

We will use the terms used in the period of Model Cities as a point of departure for this reading and discussion seminar.

Structure/Learning Objectives

The seminar is for students interested in exploring the theories of housing and urban policy in the United States. We will use the language used as a point of entry and to bridge across time.

Each week will be dedicated to one term central to the Model Cities program and still with us, or not, fifty years later. To challenge and dissect the term, we will read three texts—60 pages plus/minus—that use or reflect on that term/concept. Typically, there will be a primary source, a document written at the time; a theoretical assessment written before or since; and a recent piece of scholarship.

In addition, I will organize two field trips with stakeholders, one of the Boston, and one of the Cambridge Model Cities area, in order to give us another perspective as to the legacies of conceptual debates. I will give a short input lecture every week.

Expectations for each week

You will read, in more or less detail, the three texts. The goal of these readings is to understand the author’s position and the debate he/she is writing within.

On the basis of these readings, you will

(1) write a short reading response each week: a 350 word essay—polemical or not—on an aspect of particular interest to you that was raised by the readings.

(2) formulate a question to guide our discussion in class.

You will post your response and discussion question on the "Forum" section on Stellar by midnight Wednesday the day before class. Everyone is expected to read each other’s responses, and questions, by the Thursday class.

Absence Policy

Work in the seminar builds sequentially. Therefore, student commitment to continuous development is essential, in particular since the seminar requires both individually driven research and the coordination between these individual components to result in the desired output.

Evaluation Criteria and Completion Requirements

To be determined on an individual basis by student and instructor.

Grading Definition

A Exceptionally good performance demonstrating a superior understanding of the subject matter, a foundation of extensive knowledge, and a skillful use of concepts and/or materials.

B Good performance demonstrating capacity to use the appropriate concepts, a good understanding of the subject matter, and an ability to handle the problems and materials encountered in the subject.
C Adequate performance demonstrating an adequate understanding of the subject matter, an ability to handle relatively simple problems, and adequate preparation for moving on to more advanced work in the field.

D Minimally acceptable performance demonstrating at least partial familiarity with the subject matter and some capacity to deal with relatively simple problems, but also demonstrating deficiencies serious enough to make it inadvisable to proceed further in the field without additional work.

F Failed. This grade also signifies that the student must repeat the subject to receive credit.

Academic Integrity and Honesty

MIT’s expectations and policies regarding academic integrity should be read carefully and adhered to diligently: http://integrity.mit.edu

Writing and Communication Center

The WCC at 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 all are published scholars and writers. Not counting the WCC’s director’s years (he started the WCC in 1982), the WCC lecturers have a combined 133 years’ worth of teaching here at MIT (ranging from 4 to 24 years). The WCC works with undergraduate, graduate students, post-docs, faculty, staff, alums, and spouses. The WCC helps you strategize about all types of academic and professional writing as well as about all aspects of oral presentations (including practicing classroom presentations & conference talks as well as designing slides). No matter what department or discipline you are in, the WCC helps you think your way more deeply into your topic, helps you see new implications in your data, research, and ideas. The WCC also helps with all English as Second Language issues, from writing and grammar to pronunciation and conversation practice. The WCC is located in E18-233, 50 Ames Street). To guarantee yourself a time, make an appointment. To register with our online scheduler and to make appointments, go to https://mit.mywconline.com/. To access the WCC’s many pages of advice about writing and oral presentations, go to http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/. Check the online scheduler for up-to-date hours and available appointments.

Student Performance Criteria: NAAB

A5. Investigative Skills: Ability to gather, assess, record, apply, and comparatively evaluate relevant information within architectural coursework and design processes.

A3. Visual Communication Skills: Ability to use appropriate representational media, such as traditional graphic and digital technology skills, to convey essential formal elements at each stage of the programming and design process.
Schedule

Week 1    Thursday, September 20    Neighborhood


Further Reading:


Recommended Conference:

Slums: New Visions for An Enduring Global Phenomenon
Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies
September 20-22
Full Conference Program at: http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/

Week 2    Thursday, September 27    Ghetto (vs. Slum)


Further Reading:

Week 3  Thursday, October 4  Site Visit: Cambridge MC Area

Walking tour with Jim Stockard, Harvard, and Lauren Curry, Just-a-Start (tbc). Please read the documents in advance of the tour and formulate questions. Meeting place to be announced.


Week 4  Thursday, October 11  Demonstration (v. Model)


*Third text tbd.*

Week 5  Thursday, October 18  Participation (v. Planning)


Further Reading:


Week 6  Thursday, October 25  Unit


Week 7        Thursday, November 1        Community (v. Society)


*Third text tbd.*

**Further Reading:**


Week 8        Thursday, November 8        Site Visit: Boston MC Area

Walking tour of the Boston Model Cities Area with Louise Elving, MIT/Viva Consulting (tbc). Please read the documents in advance of the tour and formulate questions. Details to be confirmed.


Week 9        Thursday, November 15        Partnership


**Further Reading:**


Week 10   Thursday, November 22   Thanksgiving—NO CLASS

Week 11   Thursday, November 29   Failure


Further Reading:


Week 12   Thursday, December 6   Wrap Up
