Field Study of Buildings and Cities:  
A New Exploration of the Bay Region

Geography 182  
Course Syllabus  
Summer 2019

Instructor:  
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Ranging across the vast, arguably centerless San Francisco Bay Region, this course considers how direct observation of the ordinary built environments that surround us can equip informed research and speculation on the historical geography of the American city. It teaches ways of seeing, otherwise sensing, and skeptically asking questions of building types, street forms, land-use patterns, and other artifacts of material culture, no matter how humble or anonymous. Its path wends through landscapes we might label urban, suburban, exurban, and everything in between; through scenes of work, residence, leisure, consumption, and other daily rounds; between official and vernacular space, always attentive to their conflicts; between global nodes and local redoubts; and between sites of investment and disinvestment, in- and out-migration, wealth and poverty, consensus and dissensus. At every juncture, it explores the two-way relationship between built form and everyday life. It treats the Bay Region, the only region to which we have firsthand access this summer, in terms of both its spatial idiosyncrasies and its absolute typicality vis-à-vis other North American cities. And it makes the case for walking as a way of knowing — for “botanizing on the asphalt.”

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The course comprises a series of six day-long field trips. Except for an hour at the start of the first meeting, there is no classroom instruction. Each Friday from May 31 to July 5, we will meet in a different location (typically at or near a BART stop) and set out on foot from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. As we walk, we will discuss the past, present, and future of the landscapes we encounter, and of others like them. Certain sites will call forth brief lectures.

You will receive an e-mail each week with information on our meeting place (and other germane instructions) no later than Thursday. There are no section meetings. There are modest weekly reading assignments, and you will write a short response paper following every trip but the last, when a slightly longer essay comes due. It may make sense, in fact, to do each week’s reading just after we tour, not before. Our discussions will concern visible and invisible aspects of the landscape around us, not the form or content of the readings. But those readings are indeed required, and they will be posted as PDFs to the bCourses site. You should feel free to buy any of the books excerpted, or to consult Peter Ekman for recommendations on further reading.

Eight hours is a long time, and we will make multiple stops for food, drink, shade, and repose. Each trip builds in a lunch (half-)hour within striking distance of cheap eateries. You may, of course, bring your own food. You should absolutely bring water to drink, and you should wear shoes that do not impede long walks.
Week 1: Berkeley Up and Down
(May 31)

Optional:

Week 2: Oakland’s Working Centers and Edges
(June 7)

Optional:
Suzanne Stewart and Mary Praetzellis, eds., *Sights and Sounds: Essays in Celebration of West Oakland* (Sacramento: California Department of Transportation, 1997).

Week 3: “Old” San Francisco and Its “Renewal”
(June 14)

Optional:
**Week 4: San Francisco’s Zones of Emergence**  
(June 21)

Optional:

**Week 5: The Carquinez Strait; or, The Machine in the Garden**  
(June 28)

Optional:

**Week 6: “We Have Seen the Future, and It Is in Pleasanton”**  
(July 5)

Optional:
Office Hours

Peter Ekman is available by appointment to discuss any aspect of the course, the urban landscape, or the geographical tradition (as well as just about any other topic). There are no recurring, drop-in office hours.

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Writing Assignments

Each week, drawing on field notes, the readings, and your own ingenuity, you will craft a two-page, double-spaced essay in response to the landscapes we have just explored. Minimally, you might summarize where we went, what we saw, how it has changed over time, and why we care. The best papers, however, will focus on one or two specific aspects of the trip — sites, building types, themes, processes, surprises, puzzles, etc. — and interpret these in depth, forgoing the rudiments of summary.

Then, during the sixth week, you will write a slightly longer and more synthetic paper of five pages, drawing together site-specific material from multiple weeks. In this paper, you will make a more general argument about the dynamics of landscape change. No response paper is required for Week 6 (Pleasanton). Indeed, you can write the final paper before going on that trip. Or you can wait until we have done so before you write — either way. It will come due on July 7. Details on the what and the how of the final paper will emerge later in the term. It is not, however, a formal term paper that would require original research and the collection of sources.

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Grading

Attendance and participation on all six tours: 50%
Five weekly responses: 35%
Final paper: 15%