“Seminal Urban Design in Five Cities: Barcelona; Berlin; Curitiba; Emscher Valley (Germany) and Vancouver”

Instructor: Gerry Gast

La Villa Olimpica. Barcelona. The new city quarter built on the oceanfront site of a former industrial district. The project is one of several seminal urban design accomplishments of Barcelona’s recent urban design program.

This course focuses on recent seminal urban design projects in five world cities: Barcelona (Spain); Berlin (Germany); Curitiba (Brazil); The Emscher Valley (Germany) and Vancouver (British Columbia. Canada).

Projects in the five cities are examined through in-depth research, lectures, discussion/debate, student presentations and a theory-based design project. Critical discussion compares emerging theories of urban design and urban architecture.
Class Format

Each student / student team will select one of the five cities as a focus for her or his work. The research will thoroughly examine the physical setting, history, political and economic context, and environmental conditions of the project. Urban design theories that influenced the project will be identified and compared to recent efforts in other cities.

Design Project

About midway through the research process, each team will select a specific design project for a short design charrette that is rooted in the larger urban design framework of the selected city. For example, in Barcelona an important oceanfront site near the entrance to the city’s historic central harbor exists as a prime opportunity for a future “signature” urban development. The team selecting Barcelona will develop a proposal for this site. Each team will prepare a similar proposal for a critical site in its city.

Final Report and Class Presentations

The research and design project will be summarized in a class presentation and illustrated report.

The Case Study Cities

Barcelona. Barcelona’s recent transformation as the “City of Public Space” began with preparations for its hosting the 1992 Summer Olympics and continues to this day. New urban districts such as La Villa Olimpica were designed and built with astonishing speed. Older barrios such as El Raval were revitalized with careful infill development and sensitive new public spaces at several scales. Once persecuted by the repressive Franco dictatorship, Catalan Barcelona has effectively used urban design to achieve a new level of urbanity as one of the great cities of the Europe.

Berlin. Berlin’s rebuilding began before the city’s reunification following the collapse of the East German government. During the 1980’s, the western part of the city was the site of the Berlin IBA (International Building Exposition) which focused on the theme “Rebuilding the European City”. The Berlin IBA was influential in dismantling “modernism” as the prevailing urban design theory for redeveloping European cities. Several vacant urban quarters and sites were rebuilt based on international design competitions. Careful infill and rehabilitation projects filled sites that had remained vacant since the World War II bombing by Allied forces. The IBA re-established the validity of the historic European city of the pedestrian, street and public square as the urban model of choice, dethroning the “tower in the park” model proposed by Le Corbusier in 1923 and later followed in the post WW2 rebuilding. After German reunification and dismantling of the Berlin Wall, a massive rebuilding of central Berlin followed the German government’s decision to re-establish the city as the capital of a reunified
country. New urban districts such as Potsdamer Platz were built along with extensive public works and governmental building projects. The urban design philosophy established by the IBA, rebuilding the historic European city pattern, continues to guide the city center’s design.

**Curitiba.** Curitiba, Brazil was the first large city in the world to commit to a radically ambitious sustainability agenda. Under the leadership of former Mayor, now Governor of Parana State Jaime Lerner and his colleagues, Curitiba developed a multi-layered agenda of education, social services, public transit, energy and land conservation, and recycling that began in the late 1960’s and continues today. Sustainability criteria are given first priority in guiding the city’s urban design strategy. The city’s seminal accomplishments have been achieved with modest means and limited resources.

**The Emscher Valley / The Ruhr.** The Emscher Park IBA is an ambitious effort to re-build Germany’s historic industrial Ruhr region on the basis of environmental sustainability principles. Once one of the most polluted and environmentally-devastated regions of the world, the Ruhr and Emscher River Valleys have been reborn with an urban design and environmental restoration strategy that is one of the most creatively-conceived projects in the world. Vast abandoned steel mills, coke plants, mines and other industrial plants have been converted to recreational open spaces, incubator industry sites and economic development centers with relatively little new construction. The “industrial archeology” of the region has been preserved and transformed to new use in some of the most spirited and original design projects of the past half century.

**Vancouver.** Vancouver, British Columbia began its current path toward urban design excellence in the 1970’s, with the process accelerating in the mid 1980s as the City hosted its highly successful World Expo. New high density residential and mixed-use projects in the city centre have pioneered new urban neighborhood and building types. New open space systems have created continuous linkages of parks and public spaces along False Creek, English Bay and the Straights of Georgia. Imaginative and sensitive infill development has been carefully sited in many of the city’s neighborhoods. As Vancouver faces enormous growth pressures, it has successfully used its growth as an opportunity to create an urbane and diverse city centre which transformed its stature from regional to world city in two decades.

**Course Information and Questions**

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