

The Life of a City: Reading Gainesville with Jane Jacobs
IDH2930 Spring 2026 - Class # 27375

Instructor: Michael K. O'Malley, omalleym@ufl.edu

Location: Honors Village, Building 1, Room 114

Time: Thursdays, Period 5 (11:45 AM - 12:35 AM)

Required Materials:

- The Death and Life of Great American Cities, by Jane Jacobs – preferred Vintage Books Edition, December 1992 but other versions (including online/Kindle etc.) will work
- “The Life of a City” Canvas course – weekly schedule and readings, grades, and important announcements will be posted and updated here

Office Hours: I am widely available to meet outside of our scheduled class times. You can always book an appointment through the link in your Honors Canvas Cohort. You can also email at any time to set up a meeting. If you have a brief question or comment or just want to check-in, email is best.

Course Description:

How does a city work? Why do some neighborhoods feel vibrant and welcoming, while others in the same city seem lifeless or neglected? We'll explore these questions and others while discussing the classic text *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by visionary urbanist Jane Jacobs. Originally published in 1961, Jacobs's text challenged the orthodoxies of mid-century urban planning and planted the seeds for many key issues still discussed in city design today: walkability, gentrification, and vibrant public spaces, to name just a few.

This class will be a mixture of seminar-style discussions and experiential learning. We'll step out of the classroom and into the city for some walking tours, investigations of public spaces, and we'll even track down the Jane Jacobs mural currently in downtown Gainesville. Along the way, we'll hear from guest speakers--business owners, elected officials, and urban planning experts--who are the current torchbearers of Jacobs's ideas in our city. This course is ideal for students with a wide range of backgrounds and interests who are curious about how cities work—from the laws that shape them and the health and sustainability of their communities, to the forces of economics and equity that define urban life and the everyday experiences that make it meaningful.

Course Objectives:

1. Students will gain a general knowledge of Jacobs's ideas as discussed in the book and develop or refine an understanding of their historical and philosophical underpinnings
2. Students will synthesize what they've learned from the book with their own knowledge, perspectives, and experiences, analyzing issues and ideas in order to contribute to classroom discussions

3. Students will strive to evaluate the topics covered based on a number of factors, including students' own backgrounds and aspirations, other voices in academic and journalistic discussions, and peers' viewpoints as expressed through class discussions

Assignments & Grades:

Grades will be based on the following criteria:

Attendance: 25%

Participation: 25%

Discussant Presentations: 25%

Reflection Paper: 25%

Attendance & Participation:

This is a discussion-based, seminar style course, so it is a given that students will attend every class session well prepared to participate actively in all discussions. Half of the grade in this course is based on attendance and participation because those two elements are vital to the success of the course. **If you're not speaking/participating every class session, please do not expect to receive a full grade for participation.** Excused absences must be consistent with university policies in the Undergraduate Catalog and require appropriate documentation: <https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>

A note on the structure of the course: A seminar-style discussion is a particular type of classroom conversation that is both *owned* and *driven* by all participants. It is very different from a traditional classroom lecture in which the professor directs the conversation and speaks most of the time. The success of a seminar discussion is carried by and is the responsibility of every single member. In a sense it is a gathering of equals, so every member has a right to speak and to be heard (within the bounds of respectful and courteous conversation) with equal respect given and received. In more traditional classroom discussions, often students have a fear of saying the “wrong” thing, but one goal of the seminar is to generate a space of openness and freedom to share thoughts and ideas and to respond genuinely within the framework of the discussion.

We will know if we are successful in our seminar endeavors not only if each student is contributing and responding during every class session, but also if each seminar session is generating new ideas based on synthesis and analysis of the topics introduced in the book. In this sense, a successful seminar becomes a “text” of its own, such that students may even use concepts generated during a discussion as paper topics for the course.

Finally, in order to participate effectively, **it is imperative that students prepare well for each class session.** This goes beyond simply reading the required chapters for the week. Students should prepare as if they were responsible for leading that day's classroom discussion by taking time to think and reflect on the text and then preparing comments, questions, and notes to share with their peers.

Discussant Presentations: Students will be responsible for leading one class discussion and will be assigned a date during the second-class meeting. Further details and expectations will be posted on Canvas and discussed in class.

Reflection Papers: One reflection paper is required for this course. It should be a minimum of two pages. Students have broad leeway in determining the topics of these papers, but they should seek to satisfy the following two criteria:

- Be somehow connected to or stem from an issue or concept discussed in the book or in class
- Show evidence of thought and reflection resulting in an evaluation of the chosen issue or concept

These papers are not “book reports” and must not simply restate or go into further detail about a topic discussed in the book. They should say something using a well thought-out and clearly articulated argument. The instructor will work with students to determine an appropriate topic.

Grading Scale:

The grading scale below is not subject to change. No “Incomplete” (I) grades will be issued. Students are expected to keep track of their course progress and grades on Canvas throughout the semester. Any discrepancies should be reported to the instructor.

A 94 – 100

A- 90 – 93

B+ 87 – 89

B 84 – 86

B- 80 – 83

C 74 – 76

C+ 77 – 79

C- 70 – 73

D+ 67 – 69

D 64 – 66

D- 60 – 63

F <60

Academic Policies & Resources: <https://go.ufl.edu/syllabuspolicies> - please visit this link for updated policies and resources