



BROWN

## **Urban Studies: Academic Profile, 2005**

In every society, cities are the center of business, art, culture, politics and government. Cities are fast, exciting and diverse -- but they also pose difficult problems and challenges. Fully engaging the city --its promises along with its problems—requires us to draw on almost every aspect of the social sciences and humanities.

The Brown Urban Studies Program is the quintessential interdisciplinary program. Our core faculty members come from 8 academic disciplines and our students draw on very diverse ideas and methods. Yet we are a cohesive intellectual group, for our studies are all focused on the city. We organize our approach around a set of basic research and teaching areas that reflect the depth and diversity of the program:

### **1. Urban Development and Economics**

Urbanization and the development of cities are the engines of economic development and growth. The rapid urbanization of the developing world has moved billions of people into cities over the past thirty years and poses enormous challenges for the future. Our research explores urbanization and industrialization in the USA in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and in Asia and Latin America today. The faculty studies questions such as: What is the role of cities in the emerging global economy, in particular global cities like New York or Hong Kong with their vibrant financial markets and advertising industries? Will Hong Kong retain its position as the pivot of Asian financial networks or will it be dethroned by Shanghai as China's global business center? How does rising democracy, increased empowerment of city governments, and market liberalization affect urbanization and quality of life in cities. How do government restrictions on migration and urbanization in China affect not just urbanization, but income inequality and poverty? How does democratization and autonomy of local governments affect corruption of local governments in Indonesia? Research (funded by the National Science Foundation and the World Bank) and urban studies courses grapple with these and other questions in urban development, economics and geography.

### **2. Urban Politics and Community**

In the United States, cities confront a paradox: the nation's weakest political institutions face our most intractable problems. Research and courses focus on race, immigration, poverty, inequality, unemployment, environmental justice, health, and grassroots initiatives to combat social exclusion. We also study the structures of power: mayors, corruption, reform, the media, unions, interest groups, bureaucracies and city services. Both students and faculty use Providence as a laboratory studying groups like the

Dominican community and the evolution of Providence politics. On the national level, we address questions such as: Does having a majority of African-American teachers, administrators, and policymakers (in “black led” cities like Baltimore) improve the education of inner-city children? How can the cities prepare for and respond to disasters such as terrorist attacks and hurricanes? Are there more effective ways to approach crime and illegal drugs? Finally, international politics include questions about post-communist social integration in Berlin and local initiatives to address long-term unemployment in French and German cities.

### **3. The urban built environment**

We study the physical form and engineering of the city, including its urban plan, architecture, and infrastructure. Faculty and students explore subjects such as skyscrapers in Germany; historical preservation and archaeology; film architecture and set design; the illumination of buildings; modern American architecture of the 1930s; the architecture of Providence and Rhode Island; the relationship between rivers and cities; and the enormous impact of the automobile. Our work on the built environment includes not only books, articles, and academic papers, but also planning documents and exhibitions.

### **4. American urban history**

Early American cities were crude and rough (Thomas Jefferson complained that they added as much strength to the body politic as do canker sores do to the human body). Research and courses in this area trace the cities from those rough colonial times, through the brawling 19<sup>th</sup> century urban machines, to the challenges of the present day. Again, we draw on multiple disciplines, including history, sociology, geography, planning, and political science. Specialized research ranges across topics like the influence of the 19<sup>th</sup> century cult of the bachelor, the politics of gender in Los Angeles, the process of industrialization in Lowell, civil rights movements, and the historical dynamics of race and ethnicity.

### **5. Suburbanization**

The 2000 census made it official. The United States is the first suburban nation – more than half the population lives in the “burbs” The process of suburbanization began in the nineteenth century and was facilitated by improvements in transportation for commuters. It has now expanded to include edge cities (new urban centers on the perimeter of cities) and exurbs (or “burbs without urbs” that spring up along highways far outside any city). The suburb in its various forms has produced dramatic changes in the nation’s physical and social landscape. Faculty research focuses on the impact of the automobile, the economic strategies of edge city developers, and the related phenomena of “white flight” and racial exclusion. We compare education and employment in middle class suburbs to that in poor inner cities. We are interested in environmental justice within metropolitan areas, one of the many subjects we explore with the use of geographic information systems and other methods of spatial analysis. Research on the sprawling metropolis of Los Angeles promises to provide new findings about racial and ethnic population distribution, the role of expressway construction in stimulating development, the cultural impact of automobile dependence, and the difficulties of providing basic services (including water) over wide areas.

## **6. Literary representations of urban space and social relations**

The city has always stimulated art, which in turn frames and illuminates urbanism itself. The history of cultural criticism interrogates the ways urban life shapes subjectivity. Recent work examines novelistic representations of women in early twentieth-century London, segregated social space in Harlem Renaissance literature of the 1920s, the rise of urban nostalgia in new literature and film about the turn of the century, and exploration of American political culture through novels and film.

### **Undergraduate Education**

The program's undergraduate concentration emphasizes the development of students' powers of analysis and their ability to think in an interdisciplinary manner. Roughly twenty-five seniors a year graduate with a major in Urban Studies; six-to-eight typically write an honors thesis. The core curriculum is divided between core courses and intensive seminars. The latter give students opportunities to carry out research and fieldwork projects and provide "capstone" experiences. The demanding academic work attracts the best students, many of whom are supported with summer research fellowships and internships, often followed by an honors thesis. Our students usually develop a distinct spirit – reflected in their newsletter, the department undergraduate group, student-led conferences and other activities.

The program provides an excellent background for our students who pursue careers in city planning, architectural design, historical preservation, real estate development, community organizing, as well as law and business administration. The program also serves students who do graduate work within an urban studies-related discipline, such as American studies, economics, history, history of art and architecture, political science, sociology, or geography.

### **The Community**

The Program has a close relationship with the City of Providence. The faculty serve on numerous local and state government committees and councils. They also lend their expertise to a wide range of community organizations. The Program offers senior seminar-workshops on aspects of urban development in Providence, such as grass-roots community action and urban development. These activities bring together concentrators, faculty and members of the concerned communities/agencies to better understand and guide urban development in Providence. As part of their fieldwork training, students are expected to work with local agencies and non-profit organizations. Summer internships are available for concentrators. Students are also encouraged to undertake projects involving the study of Providence and nearby cities for their honors thesis projects. In recent years, students have conducted feasibility studies and written reports on the functioning of the various agencies and organizations in Providence. As a symbol of our special relationship, the Mayor of Providence traditionally addresses our graduates and hands them their diplomas.