

Class meeting: Th 4:30 PM – 7:10 PM
Class location: Buchanan Hall D003
Sect/Credits: 001 / 3 credit hours
Instructor office: EXPL 2413

Instructor: Nathan Burtch
Email: nburtch@gmu.edu
Office hours: F 10:00 AM – 12:00 PM
(via Zoom)

General Information

Classmate contact information:

Name	Email	Phone

Catalog description: Reviews spatial, policy, and administration principles that guide urban planning activities in the United States. Outlines differences between theory and practice and provides tools, methods, and perspectives commonly incorporated into practice of urban planning and policy analysis.

Course overview: This course is intended as a general introduction to the field of urban planning. The history, practice, and theory of urban planning will be discussed, as well as a few of the different ‘flavors’ of urban planning subfields. Planning has been historically seen as a technical and applied career; this will be introduced by means of a course project intended to see the interdisciplinary and multifaceted approaches needed to be a planning practitioner. Planning is interdisciplinary and multifaceted because cities and urban areas themselves are complicated human constructs, necessitating an examination of the history, geography, sociology, politics, and economics of urban places and urban people. This course will focus upon the foundations of planning as seen in the context of the United States.

The format of the course is largely lecture based with ‘current event’ discussions. There may also be occasional films, guest speakers, or demonstrations. You are expected to participate and ask questions.

Choose a metropolitan region: Students will examine one metropolitan region in the United States in detail through a course project. A list of the US Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) of over 1,000,000 in population is on our Canvas site. Only one person per course will be able to choose each particular MSA. There will be no requirements of physically visiting the city, so feel free to choose from any throughout the country. Details will be provided on the first day of class.

Target audience: Urban planning is co-listed at the 300/500 level; it is therefore intended for both undergraduate and graduate students interested in urban topics and the practice of planning. This course is an elective for the GECA MS and the ESGS PhD programs. Beyond academic programs, this course is appropriate for any student at Mason that wishes to learn about cities and urban planning.

Applicable learning outcomes: Successful completion of this course will teach students to:

1. Analyze characteristic features of a metropolis and connect how persistent problems, institutional transformations, and creative expression may emerge from this environment.
2. Interpret, evaluate, compare, and critique the views and experiences of particular social, economic, and cultural groups in the metropolis.
3. Evaluate how an individual or a group may have access to influencing public decisions in the metropolis, how they may pursue collective ends, or how they may contribute to community well-being.
4. Critically analyze a specific topic or question in order to delineate constituent elements of the situation, to define challenges that are faced, and to examine the potential for constructive resolution or development.

Prerequisites: None.

Enrollment and repeat policy: GGS 557 can only be repeated in special circumstances. Students enrolling in this course again must submit all newly completed work. Any repeat students must choose a new metropolitan area for their project focus.

Course Materials

Textbook: This course has one required textbook.

Levy, J. M., Hirt, S. A., and Dawkins, C. J. 2025. Contemporary urban planning. 12th ed. New York: Routledge.

ISBN 13: 978-1-03-227053-1

The Levy et al. textbook is **required** for this course. The course textbook is available from various outlets in various forms. It is available through the Mason bookstore or through your online provider of choice. This is the newest, updated edition of this classic introduction to the discipline of urban planning. In addition to this required text, there may be other readings posted on Canvas. Students are expected to read before class and be prepared to discuss topics from the readings.

GG5 computer lab: The lab in EXPL 2102 is open 24 hours for you to use. Registration in a GGS class should automatically grant you access. Please contact ggsit@gmu.edu to report issues.

Software, hardware, and data: Two assignments in this course will make use of specific software packages; one will be ArcGIS Pro and the other is Microsoft Excel. Details on the usage and access of this software will be provided. It is recommended that students have the technological bandwidth to stream data; students should have regular, reliable access to a computer with an updated operating system and a stable broadband Internet connection (consistent 1.5 Mbps or higher download and upload speed; you can use <https://www.speedtest.net/> to check the speed of your connection).

Online materials and email: This course will make extensive use of Canvas at Mason. Course materials such as assignments will be available only in electronic version on Canvas. Students are expected to submit assignments online through Canvas. **Only Word document (.docx or .doc) or Adobe PDF (.pdf) file formats will be accepted**, unless otherwise noted in the assignment. Grades will be posted on Canvas as well. Make sure you are familiar and comfortable with the Canvas interface.

Students are required to have a Mason NetID and associated @gmu.edu email account, which will allow you access to Canvas and lab computers. Please use this university email account when contacting the professor regarding this class; as explained in the Administrative section below, the course professor will not respond to messages sent from a non-Mason email address. Students may also use Microsoft Teams to communicate with the professor, although students should not expect instant responses from these direct chats; in other words, Teams is not a 24/7 direct support line for the class.

Grading

Exams (40%): There will be two non-cumulative exams in this course. Each will be worth 20% of the overall grade. These exams will be timed (likely 45 – 60 minutes) and composed of multiple choice questions along with short and longer essay questions. Exams will cover topics from the lectures only but completing readings will help. Though non-cumulative, planning is inherently cumulative so your accumulated knowledge in the class will be useful as course topics build upon each other.

Course project (30%): Over the course of the semester, students will critically analyze a major metropolitan region within in the United States. A list of metropolitan regions of over 1,000,000 in population has been posted to Canvas. You will hand in drafts of each section of the project during the semester (see Assignments), each focused on a different aspect of the urban system. The project includes both a written document and a presentation.

Current events and issues discussions (10%): Each student will find articles to discuss with the class during the semester regarding current events, debates, policies, and issues of cities and planning. These can be articles from traditional media sources (newspapers) or online media and can include opinion pieces. These must be relatively current (from the past several years). If you find an article you wish to present to the class, you will need to post the article to the course discussion board by the Sunday before the class for the week. Students are expected to read the article before class and discuss the issue in class. A grading rubric (number of articles, how participation is assessed, etc.) will be discussed early in class once class size has been established.

Assignments (10%): To keep students moving at a solid pace towards the course project, different sections will be due approximately every two weeks. The due dates are posted in the course calendar. These are draft sections; students will receive comments on how to improve the section for the final project. Students are expected to expand upon these drafts for the final submission of the project. Each assignment will be graded out of 4 points (4 – Excellent; 3 – Satisfactory; 2 – Unsatisfactory; 0 – Not completed).

Graduate research (10% G): To get graduate credit for this course, graduate students will be required to complete an additional graduate research component. Students will investigate an urban planning topic related to either their own graduate research (if applicable), or to another topic of interest. This research project will consist of an annotated bibliography of relevant literature. You will need to arrange to meet with the instructor during the semester to discuss the topic that you will cover. More details will be provided on Canvas during the semester.

Graduate grading scale:

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Percent Required</i>		<i>Assignment</i>	<i>Total Grade %</i>	
A+	96 to 100	B	83 to 85.9	Exams (2)	40%
A	93 to 95.9	B-	80 to 82.9	Project	30%
A-	90 to 92.9	C	70 to 79.9	Grad research	10%
B+	86 to 89.9	F	<70		

Graduate student expectations: In order to earn graduate credit, students enrolled in GGS 557 have additional expectations. Graduate students are expected to develop deeper knowledge of the topics presented in class and synthesize with higher-level products and writing. In other words, expectations for the work produced in GGS 557 are commensurate with expectations of a 500-level course. Details on differential grading of graduate students on the above graded items will be provided on Canvas.

Note on attendance: Regular attendance is an expectation. Those that make a habit of missing class tend to do worse in this course than those that do attend. It is in your best interest to come to class and participate as attendance will lead to a better understanding of course concepts. Students are responsible for any announcement given by the instructor during class regardless of their personal attendance.

Students that must miss classes because of religious observances or participation in University activities should provide documentation to the professor within the first two weeks of the course. Reasonable accommodation will be provided for work missed on those days. It is expected that if a student has one of these excused absences on a day in which an assignment is due that the student submits the assignment early.

Make-up and late assignment policies: Due dates are explicitly stated. All assessed/graded items in this course will be accepted past the ascribed due date until **December 12th**. Late penalties are assigned in a two-tiered system. Items turned in **within seven (7) days** will result in a **10% deduction**. Items **later than seven (7) days** will result in a **25% deduction**. This penalty begins 1 minute after the due date. Technical excuses ("computer system error", "didn't submit correctly on Canvas", etc.) will not be accepted as reasons for late work. You are expected to start work early. **Never underestimate the time you will spend on the assignments.**

If you are ill or physically indisposed and cannot submit work on time, you must notify the instructor beforehand for you to have a chance to make up the work without late penalty. It is in your best interest to turn in everything on time to avoid falling irrecoverably behind. Please contact the instructor if you are struggling and you will receive aid as best as the instructor can provide.

Incomplete policy: Students may request an incomplete for this course if they (a) currently have a 75% grade based on submitted coursework and relative weighting; (b) have completed at least 50% of coursework materials; (c) cannot complete scheduled coursework for a cause beyond reasonable control; and (d) submit an Incomplete Grade Contract with the professor. In general, students have until the 9th week of the following full semester to complete their work (unless it is the student's final semester). All incomplete work will be assigned **late penalties as outlined** in this syllabus.

Administrative

Academic standards: *The following statement is part of the “Common Policies Addendum” required by the University by AP.2.5; the wording is provided by the Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning as of 5-19-2025 at <https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/home/gmu-common-course-policies/>.*

Academic Standards exist to promote authentic scholarship, support the institution’s goal of maintaining high standards of academic excellence, and encourage continued ethical behavior of faculty and students to cultivate an educational community which values integrity and produces graduates who carry this commitment forward into professional practice.

As members of the George Mason University community, we are committed to fostering an environment of trust, respect, and scholarly excellence. Our academic standards are the foundation of this commitment, guiding our behavior and interactions within this academic community. The practices for implementing these standards adapt to modern practices, disciplinary contexts, and technological advancements. Our standards are embodied in our courses, policies, and scholarship, and are upheld in the following principles:

- **Honesty:** Providing accurate information in all academic endeavors, including communications, assignments, and examinations.
- **Acknowledgement:** Giving proper credit for all contributions to one’s work. This involves the use of accurate citations and references for any ideas, words, or materials created by others in the style appropriate to the discipline. It also includes acknowledging shared authorship in group projects, co-authored pieces, and project reports.
- **Uniqueness of Work:** Ensuring that all submitted work is the result of one’s own effort and is original, including free from self-plagiarism. This principle extends to written assignments, code, presentations, exams, and all other forms of academic work.

Violations of these standards — including but not limited to plagiarism, fabrication, and cheating — are taken seriously and will be addressed in accordance with university policies. The process for reporting, investigating, and adjudicating violations is [outlined in the university's procedures](#). Consequences of violations may include academic sanctions, disciplinary actions, and other measures necessary to uphold the integrity of our academic community.

The principles outlined in these academic standards reflect our collective commitment to upholding the highest standards of honesty, acknowledgement, and uniqueness of work. By adhering to these principles, we ensure the continued excellence and integrity of George Mason University's academic community.

Student responsibility: Students are responsible for understanding how these general expectations regarding academic standards apply to each course, assignment, or exam they participate in; students should ask their instructor for clarification on any aspect that is not clear to them.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: *The following statement is part of the “Common Policies Addendum” required by the University by AP.2.5; the wording is provided by the Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning as of 5-19-2025 at <https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/home/gmu-common-course-policies/>.*

Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to upholding the letter and spirit of the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. Under the administration of University Life, Disability Services implements and coordinates reasonable accommodations and disability-related services that afford equal access to university programs and activities. Students can begin the registration process with Disability Services at any time during their enrollment at George Mason University. If you are seeking accommodations, please visit <https://ds.gmu.edu/> for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: ods@gmu.edu. Phone: (703) 993-2474.

Student responsibility: Students are responsible for registering with Disability Services and communicating about their approved accommodations with their instructor *in advance* of any relevant class meeting, assignment, or exam.

FERPA and use of GMU email addresses for course communication: *The following statement is part of the “Common Policies Addendum” required by the University by AP.2.5; the wording is provided by the Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning as of 5-19-2025 at <https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/home/gmu-common-course-policies/>.*

The [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#) governs the disclosure of [education records for eligible students](#) and is an essential aspect of any course. **Students must use their GMU email account** to receive important University information, including communications related to this class. Instructors will not respond to messages sent from or send messages regarding course content to a non-GMU email address.

Student responsibility: Students are responsible for checking their GMU email regularly for course-related information, and/or ensuring that GMU email messages are forwarded to an account they do check.

Title IX resources and required reporting: *The following statement is part of the “Common Policies Addendum” required by the University by AP.2.5; the wording is provided by the Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning as of 5-19-2025 at <https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/home/gmu-common-course-policies/>.*

As a part of George Mason University’s commitment to providing a safe and non-discriminatory learning, living, and working environment for all members of the University community, the University does not discriminate on the basis of sex or gender in any of its education or employment programs and activities. Accordingly, **all non-confidential employees, including your faculty member, have a legal requirement to report to the Title IX Coordinator, all relevant details obtained directly or indirectly about any incident of Prohibited Conduct** (such as sexual harassment, sexual assault, gender-based stalking, dating/domestic violence). Upon notifying the Title IX Coordinator of possible Prohibited Conduct, the Title IX Coordinator will assess the report and determine if outreach is required. If outreach is required, the individual the report is about (the “Complainant”) will receive a communication, likely in the form of an email, offering that person the option to meet with a representative of the Title IX office.

For more information about non-confidential employees, resources, and Prohibited Conduct, please see [University Policy 1202: Sexual and Gender-Based Misconduct and Other Forms of Interpersonal](#)

Violence. Questions regarding Title IX can be directed to the Title IX Coordinator via email to TitleIX@gmu.edu, by phone at 703-993-8730, or in person on the Fairfax campus in Aquia 373.

Student opportunity: If you prefer to speak to someone **confidentially**, please contact one of Mason's confidential employees in Student Support and Advocacy ([SSAC](#)), Counseling and Psychological Services ([CAPS](#)), Student Health Services ([SHS](#)), and/or the [Office of the University Ombudsperson](#).

Academic and religious calendars: The Registrar establishes academic calendars in advance of every academic semester or term. You can view the [Fall 2025 academic calendar](#) for details. Some important dates include:

- First day of class	August 25
- Labor Day (University closed)	September 1
- Last day to drop course with 100% refund	September 8
- Last day of unrestricted withdrawal	September 30
- Fall Break (No classes)	October 13
- Last day of selective withdrawal	October 27
- Election Day (No classes)	November 4
- Thanksgiving Recess (University closed)	November 26 – 30
- Last day of class	December 8
- Last day of examination period	December 17

Mason also maintains [a calendar of religious holidays](#). Students will receive reasonable accommodations so that they can observe religious holidays. Students must contact the professor prior to any planned observance in order to create reasonable accommodations. In general, work that is due on a date of a religious holiday is expected to be completed prior to the deadline.

Course materials and student privacy: All course materials posted to Canvas or other course sites are private; by federal law, any materials that identify specific students (via their name, voice, or image) **must not be shared** with anyone not enrolled in this class. Video recordings of class meetings that include audio or visual information from other students are private and must not be shared. Live video conference meetings (e.g. Collaborate or Zoom) that include audio or visual information from other students must be viewed privately and not shared with others in your household. Some of our synchronous meetings in this class may be recorded to provide necessary information for students in this class. Recordings will be stored on Canvas and will only be accessible to students taking this course during this semester. **Sharing of instructor-created materials** (lectures, notes, videos, assignments, exams, etc.) to others not currently enrolled in this specific section of this class, **including to public or private online “study” sites, is considered a violation of Mason’s Academic Standards.**

Gender identity, pronoun use, and proper address: Students are welcome to share their chosen name and gender pronouns with the instructor and discuss how the instructor can best address you in class and via email. As well, students should be aware that they can use Mason-provided tools to [update their chosen name and pronouns](#); these changes will appear in Canvas class sites among other places. Your instructor uses *he/him/his* pronouns. When addressing your instructor in writing or verbally, please use “Dr. Burtch” or “Prof. Burtch.” The surname ‘Burtch’ is pronounced the same as the genus of trees called ‘birch.’

Individual work, collaboration, and generative-AI: This is additional guidance to the Academic Standards portion above. At times, you may want to work with other students in this course towards completing homework or otherwise studying. This is good; there are likely times where student learning is enhanced through collaboration. There is even a spot in the top of this syllabus where you can jot down contact information for some classmates! While collaboration and group learning is encouraged in this course, each student **absolutely must** turn in their own work, from their own computer, and any written discussion must be theirs alone, and not attributable to another person or group, *except where noted* (for example, quoting authors as a small portion of your scholarly work). This also applies to online sources; you cannot copy the words of anyone else for any graded part of this course. It is not enough to exchange a few synonyms within a sentence! You must write, summarize, and analyze with your own words and ideas.

A new technology, generative-AI models, requires an additional statement. **Student use of generative-AI models or tools must conform to Mason Academic Standards.** This means that students are expected, as outlined above, to turn in their own work, in their own words. Using generative-AI models to submit written documents, answers to assignment/test questions, or otherwise passing AI-generated text as your own work **does not conform to academic standards.** The **only exception** is that students are permitted to generate AI-produced imagery included in submitted materials if it enhances the submitted product; for example, a custom icon or logo on a map. Students are permitted to use generative-AI for this class in non-assessed activities; summarizing content and brainstorming are examples of those cases.

In short, your professor will not use generative-AI to grade/assess your work, and you will not use generative-AI to produce your work.

Instructor availability: Please do not hesitate to contact your instructor if you have questions about course topics or assignments. Your instructor will do his best to answer all weekday emails within 24 hours, and weekend emails within 48 hours. Should you not receive a response within that time frame, you may send a gentle reminder via email. Do try to avoid last-minute emails, as your instructor may not have email accessible immediately before deadlines. It is generally a good practice to avoid sending an email at the first sign of trouble with an assignment; often you will find the proper solution by giving yourself an hour or two to problem solve! Please make use of the **office hours** listed at the top of this document. Generally, issues can be clarified quickly in person or in a live online chat.

Non-discrimination and inclusive classrooms: George Mason University, in addition to adhering to state and federal regulations against discrimination, has created our own [non-discrimination policy](#). This policy is to allow all students, faculty, and staff to work or learn in an “environment free from any discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, ethnic national origin (including shared ancestry and/or ethnic characteristics), sex, disability, military status (including veteran status), sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, pregnancy status, genetic information, or any other characteristic protected by law.” If you face discrimination, or know that discrimination has occurred in our Mason community, you can submit details of the incident to the [Office of Access, Compliance, and Community](#). Within our classroom, we are committed to the value of inclusive excellence at Mason, which values each of our individualities and provides opportunities to consider and learn about different perspectives than our own. Our classroom extends to any digital spaces we use; students are expected to respect others in online discussion boards, synchronous online meetings, and any other virtual spaces of class contact. You are

expected to use **netiquette** in those spaces and practice the core principles of being a **digital citizen**; respect, educate, and protect.

University-wide closures and class cancellations/delays: There may be times during the semester in which George Mason University announces university-wide closures or delays. Should inclement weather or another emergency force Mason to close, causing our class to cancel meeting times, we will not meet. Courses without meeting (asynchronous) may also be affected. Check the Mason website and our own Canvas site for updates. Other cancellations or delays to class will be **announced via Canvas** by your professor. In the event that this course has missed meeting times, the course schedule, assignment deadlines, and other course alterations will be decided upon and announced via Canvas and email by the professor. You are expected to stay abreast of any changes.

Use of electronic devices: Your professor **encourages the use of devices** that both aid your learning ability and do not distract from the learning of others. Except for mobile phones and audio/video recorders, you are free to use any electronic device that fulfills both of those conditions. All electronic devices should be muted or silenced. Please be respectful of the class and avoid use of social media during class which can distract both you and your classmates. You are expected to adhere to Mason's student code of conduct; disruptive behavior will result in classroom removal. Audio/video recording requires the consent of the professor. This policy pertains to any in-person aspect of the course.

GGG 557 course schedule

Dates	Lecture Topics	Coursework Due
Unit 1: The background of urban planning		
Week 1 Aug 26	Intro: Why do we plan? / What is urban and metropolitan?	Read Chapter 1
Week 2 Sep 4	US urbanization and suburbanization	Read Chapter 2
Week 3 Sep 11	Planning history (<i>in person topic</i>) / Mapping the city (<i>online lecture/tutorial</i>)	Read Chapter 3, 4 Assignment 1: History
Unit 2: The practice of planning		
Week 4 Sep 18	Planning law and rights	Read Chapter 5
Week 5 Sep 25	Comprehensive planning (<i>in person topic</i>) / Demographics (<i>online lecture/tutorial</i>)	Read Chapter 8 Assignment 2: Maps
Week 6 Oct 2	Issues of politics and social equity planning	Read Chapters 6, 7 Assignment 2.5: Bibliography
Week 7 Oct 9	Land use planning / Exam 1	Read Chapter 9 Assignment 3: Demography
Week 8 Oct 16	Metropolitan and higher scales of planning	Read Chapter 15
Unit 3: Example fields of planning		
Week 9 Oct 23	Environmental planning and growth management	Read Chapter 14 Assignment 4: Neighborhoods
Week 10 Oct 30	Urban design	Read Chapter 10
Week 11 Nov 6	Transportation planning	Read Chapter 12 Assignment 5: Environment
Week 12 Nov 13	Transportation panel discussion	
Week 13 Nov 20	Housing, urban renewal, and community development	Read Chapter 11 Assignment 6: Transportation
Thanksgiving	<i>Thanksgiving Break – No class</i>	
Week 14 Dec 4	Economic development / Design charrette	Read Chapter 13 Grad project
Finals Week Dec 11	Exam 2 Course presentations <i>Thursday, Dec 11, 4:30 – 7:15 PM</i>	Final project

Note: The GGS 557 course schedule is tentative and is subject to revision by the instructor