
Class meeting: None (Asynchronous)
Class location: canvas.gmu.edu
Sect/Credits: DL1 / 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: Analyzes topics of immediate interest. *(This is a new special topics course covering cities and urbanism from a world regional perspective.)*

Course overview: The earliest settlements in the world began nearly 10,000 years ago. Places with several thousand residents that featured complex social relationships, places that modern humans would recognize as cities, date to about 5,000 years ago. In the time since, cities have grown in size, complexity, and geographic spread across the world. With these developments, different cultures and different physical environments have influenced the ways that cities operate; there are recursive relationships between culture, environment, and city development.

In this course, we will explore a systematic field of geography (urban geography) through a lens of regional analysis. Through seeing how cities compare and differentiate between major world regions, this course will demonstrate the distinctiveness of urban processes in different cultures and the effects of globalization on connectivity and homogenization of urban expressions. Urban challenges and opportunities are outlined and given depth through case studies of individual global cities.

Online course: GGS 590 is presented as an asynchronous online course. “Asynchronous” means that there are no scheduled meeting times for this course. Still, there will be specific due dates for graded work in the course that you are expected to meet. It is incumbent upon each student to organize their time and work through materials in a timely and efficient manner. Much of the asynchronous material will be presented as videos made by your professor. There are other asynchronous components, which may include other videos, quizzes, discussions, student presentations, or other assessed work.

The course has been designed in weekly segments (see the schedule at the end of the syllabus). Segments will be released in order in a prescribed manner. Students will not have access to the entirety of the course materials from the start; you will get the materials necessary for each week as the week approaches. This is done to ease logistical problems of students being at significantly different sections of the course. Please do not ask for advanced access to materials.

Target audience: This course is co-listed at the 300/500 level; it is therefore intended for both undergraduate and graduate students interested in the topic of urbanization. GGS 590 is an elective to the MS GECA and PhD ESGS programs. This course is appropriate for any student at Mason that wants a global perspective on cities and urban processes.

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

1. Evaluate how regional contexts produce different in urban development
2. Interpret, evaluate, compare, and critique how colonial history and globalization economies produce uneven urban development
3. Evaluate how concepts of geography (diffusion, regional differentiation, human-environment interaction, etc.) to urban form and practices
4. Critically analyze the sources and potential solutions to global urban problems.

Prerequisites: None.

Enrollment and repeat policy: GGS 590 is an omnibus 'selected topics' course that can be repeated up to 12 credits as long as the topic varies. Repeating GGS 590 with this topic can only be done in special circumstances. Students enrolling in this course and topic again must submit all newly completed work.

Course Materials

Required text: This course has one required textbook.

Brunn, S. D., Zeigler, D. J., Hays-Mitchell, M., and Graybill, J. K., eds. 2020. *Cities of the world: Regional patterns and urban environments*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
ISBN 13:879-1-5381-2634-9

The Brunn 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 text that takes a regional approach to understanding cities and culture. 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: As of the posting of this syllabus, there is no intention for any assignments in this class to require specialized software. Written assignments are necessary, so access to document processing software (like Microsoft Word, but others work too) is necessary. 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

Final paper (25%): Over the course of the semester, students will research a specific space or issue connected to a city. The city and the space/issue is the choice of each student. Research for the paper will be built incrementally through individual assignments, but the final paper will be a story built from those (and additional) components. The project includes both a written document and a presentation.

Final exam (20%): The final is a cumulative examination of topics covered in this course. The exam will (most probably) be a mix of multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, short answer, and long answer questions. The focus of questions will be on lectures, but a few questions may come from readings or other portions of course. Details about question types and length of the exam will be given as the exam date approaches.

Travel presentations (2 x 10%, 20% total): Twice during the term, each student will create a presentation about a city located in that week's region. In this presentation, students will outline travel possibilities for that city. A signup page will be on Canvas in the early part of the semester. More assignment details will also be on Canvas.

Assignments (10%): As a means of gathering information for the final paper, students will be given a series of smaller research assignments. These assignments, while not directly constituting parts of the final paper, are meant for students to better understand a city and eventually frame their more directed final research paper. Assignments will involve finding data, resources, and otherwise researching aspects of a large city in the world.

Quizzes (7.5%): Weeks with regional topics (in the schedule at the end of the syllabus, Weeks 2 through 12) will have an associated quiz. Each quiz will be timed and relatively short. Questions will include multiple choice and map identification.

Discussions (7.5%): There will be twelve (12) group discussions in this course. Most discussions will require two parts; posting and commenting. Topics will be provided for each discussion. Topics will generally revolve around finding and discussing online resources.

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 present a portion of the course lecture for the final scheduled lecture for this course (the future of urbanization). This presentation will require independent research. You will work with the professor and other graduate students to ensure independent coverage of topics. 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	Final paper	25%
A	93 to 95.9	B-	80 to 82.9	Final exam	20%
A-	90 to 92.9	C	70 to 79.9	Travel pres.	20%
B+	86 to 89.9	F	<70	Grad research	10%

Graduate student expectations: In order to earn graduate credit, students enrolled in GGS 590 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 590 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.

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 590 course schedule

Week	Lecture/Lab Topic	Coursework
Unit 1: Introduction and key urban theories		
Week 0 Aug 25 – Aug 31	Introduction to cities of the world	
Week 1 Sep 1 – Sep 7	Key theories of cities and urban development	Read Chapter 1 Discussion 1: - Post Thursday, 9-4 - Comment Sunday, 9-7
Unit 2: Atlanta, Bogota, Ciudad Juarez, Detroit: Cities of the Americas		
Week 2 Sep 8 – Sep 14	Northern America: The United States and Canada	Read Chapter 2 Quiz 1: - Due Sunday, 9-14 Discussion 2: - Post Thursday, 9-11 - Comment Sunday, 9-14 Assignment 1
Week 3 Sep 15 – Sep 21	Middle America: Central America and the Caribbean	Read Chapter 3 Quiz 2: - Due Sunday, 9-21 Discussion 3: - Post Thursday, 9-18 - Comment Sunday, 9-21
Week 4 Sep 22 – Sep 28	South America: Andean America, the Southern Cone, Portuguese America, and the Guianas	Read Chapter 4 Quiz 3: - Due Sunday, 9-28 Discussion 4: - Post Thursday, 9-25 - Comment Sunday, 9-28
Unit 3: Addis Ababa, Budapest, Cairo, Dubai: Cities of Africa, Europe, and Central/Southwest Asia		
Week 5 Sep 29 – Oct 5	Europe: Northern, Southern, Western, and most of Eastern Europe	Read Chapter 5 Quiz 4: - Due Sunday, 10-5 Discussion 5: - Post Thursday, 10-2 - Comment Sunday, 10-5 Assignment 2
Week 6 Oct 6 – Oct 12	(Much of) The former USSR: Russia and Central Asia	Read Chapter 6 Quiz 5: - Due Sunday, 10-12 Discussion 6: - Post Thursday, 10-9 - Comment Sunday, 10-12

Week	Lecture/Lab Topic	Coursework
Week 7 Oct 13 – Oct 19	MENA: The Middle East (Southwest Asia) and North Africa	Read Chapter 7 Quiz 6: - Due Sunday, 10-19 Discussion 7: - Post Thursday, 10-16 - Comment Sunday, 10-19
Week 8 Oct 20 – Oct 26	Sub-Saharan Africa: Western, Eastern, Southern, and Central Africa	Read Chapter 8 Quiz 7: - Due Sunday, 10-26 Discussion 8: - Post Thursday, 10-23 - Comment Sunday, 10-26 Assignment 3
Unit 4: Auckland, Bangkok, Chongqing, Dhaka: Cities of South/East/Southeast Asia and Oceania		
Week 9 Oct 27 – Nov 2	South Asia: Hindu Kush Himalayan region and Littoral South Asia	Read Chapter 9 Quiz 8: - Due Sunday, 11-2 Discussion 9: - Post Thursday, 10-30 - Comment Sunday, 11-2
Week 10 Nov 3 – Nov 9	Southeast Asia: Mainland and Maritime Southeast Asia	Read Chapter 10 Quiz 9: - Due Sunday, 11-9 Discussion 10: - Post Thursday, 11-6 - Comment Sunday, 11-9
Week 11 Nov 10 – Nov 16	East Asia: Greater China, Japanese Archipelago, Korea, and Mongol Heartland	Read Chapter 11 Quiz 10: - Due Sunday, 11-16 Discussion 11: - Post Thursday, 11-13 - Comment Sunday, 11-16 Assignment 4
Week 12 Nov 17 – Nov 23	Oceania: Australasia and Pacific Islands	Read Chapter 12 Quiz 11: - Due Sunday, 11-23 Discussion 12: - Post Thursday, 11-20 - Comment Sunday, 11-23

Week	Lecture/Lab Topic	Coursework
Unit 5: Future cities and course conclusion		
Thanks-giving	<i>Thanksgiving Break – No material this week</i>	
Week 13 Dec 1 – Dec 7	The future of urbanization	Read Chapter 13 Grad project
Finals Week	Final exam Project presentations	Final paper

Note: The GGS 590 course schedule is tentative and is subject to revision by the instructor