

URBAN MEDIA LAB: WASTE

Jessica Blaustein, Ph.D.
blaustej@newschool.edu
Meetings: By Appointment

Wednesdays 6:00 – 7:50pm
65 West 11th Street, Room 263
<http://urbanmedialabwaste.wordpress.com>

In the context of macroecological and financial crises that have dramatically shifted attention toward the management of multiple forms of garbage, excess and inefficiency, this seminar explores the cultural logics and politics of waste in contemporary urban life. Registered in terms of space (blight, sprawl, vacancy), time (waiting, boredom, drudgery), resources (refuse, trash), and increasingly in terms of digital information technologies (e-waste, obsolescence, “delete”), waste marks the residue, the left-over, the cast-off, the remainder, the damaged, the unclassifiable, the useless. Especially at a time when our virtual and material worlds are designed to streamline and optimize urban life at all scales - from operative landscapes to responsive systems to productivity software - our cultural definitions and regulations of waste are central to the ordering of our environments and ourselves.

Grounded in an understanding of the city as the irreducible density of people, built environments, and information architectures, students in this course will interpret the history of waste through the double lenses of urban development and media cultures. This research will be accompanied throughout by a range of art and design experiments that take up waste as matter for critique, reuse, or reinvention.

This seminar is project-focused, and students will be encouraged to use New York City as a laboratory for expanded research and intervention.

COURSE MATERIALS

Readings

All course readings will be available through the course website.

Projects

Alongside readings, students will be studying art and design projects, social experiments, and a range of corporate, government, educational, and non-profit sites and initiatives, to be accessible through the course website.

REQUIREMENTS

Participation (fundamental)

This course is student-driven and project-focused, therefore everyone’s full engagement with the material within and in extension of the classroom is prerequisite to its success.

Blog Contributions 25%

In advance of each class, please contribute thoughts and response to the week’s materials on the course website. Students are not expected to demonstrate a mastery over the material in their entries, but rather to meaningfully engage with the issues in the readings, with urban research sites (see below), or with any and all aspects in the news. There are no artificially imposed length or format requirements for blog contributions; they may include questions, speculations, critique and incorporate images, video, and other media. Students are expected to read the posts of their classmates, and encouraged to engage them in dialogue online and in the classroom.

Urban Research: Site Map/Catalogue 25% [[see requirements on website for updates](#)]

Students will contribute on a weekly basis to a collective catalogue of sites (built and imagined landscapes, practices, projects) that relate to the course material over the semester. Contributions should take the form of a brief, but thick thick description, or tag, that provides a window into the given site. Students are not expected to provide a bland encyclopedic summary, but rather to meaningfully capture the site vis-a-vis the course material, and to point to additional information as necessary so that other visitors can understand why/how it matters.

Over the first half of the semester, specific sites will be listed on the course schedule each week after required course readings. (In the case of weeks with several sites, sites will likely be designated by groups for simplicity’s sake, but students should approach their tags individually.) Over the course of the second half of the semester, students are asked to continue their site work in a direction of their choosing, in consultation with me.

The site catalogue will reside on the course website, and will likely take the form of a map. More detail is forthcoming. Until a format is in place, site descriptions can be submitted as blog contributions.

Case Study (Presentation + Final Form) 50% [see requirements on website for updates]

Case study topics are in the process of being finalized.

Group sign-up will take place the second or third week.

After the Spring Break, all classes will be focused around specific case studies of what are commonly referred to as “waste streams.” The NYC Department of Sanitation’s Bureau of Waste Prevention Reuse and Recycling lists “four types of residential waste-streams that the Department of Sanitation is responsible for collecting: Refuse, Paper, Metals/Glass/Plastic/Beverage Cartons, and Street Basket Waste (<http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycwasteless/html/resources/wcs.shtml#categories>). Drawing directly or indirectly from these categories, each case study will focus upon a single waste stream, but approach it in a radically interdisciplinary way, bringing media studies to bear on both the content and the form of the research.

Case studies are to be developed and presented by small groups of 2-3 students. They are detailed and multifaceted inquiries, exploratory and descriptive collections of materials that work together to communicate an in-depth account of a specific subject. As a starting point, groups can explore the preliminary resources listed on the course schedule for each case, but all are encouraged to expand from there. Groups will determine the approach and format of each case study, but all final case studies must include an introduction, evidence of primary research, a strong New York City-specific component, a visual catalogue of examples, a bibliography of references, and an individual contribution from each member of the group, such as a written or visual essay. Please note that this list may be modified in the coming weeks per pending publication opportunity for the course work. Stay tuned. Note as well that individual contributions are to *supplement* the collaboratively produced case study, not to stand in its place.

Presentation (beginning March 23 as per course schedule)

Each group will use a class period as a creative and critical platform for the presentation of their case study, which will be submitted in final form at the end of the semester. Presentation format and style are to be determined by each group. It is understood that case studies presented will be works-in-process, and students are encouraged to use the class time as an opportunity for critical response and feedback from their peers, or even as an instrument that contributes in some way to the final case study itself. If presentations are to involve A/V equipment, please be sure to inform me of your intentions in advance, and to arrive early to set-up.

Final Form (due May 16 at noon)

More information forthcoming.

RESOURCES

Supplementary Materials

A list of supplementary readings and other materials that are relevant to class topics and discussions will be provided on the course website.

Around Town Announcements

Programs + activities around town that resonate with the course material will be announced on the course website. All are asked to contribute to this effort.

POLICIES + EXPECTATIONS

Deadlines

Late submissions will be downgraded. No incompletes will be given in this course.

Honesty/Fair Use

Please see the Student Guidebook for Academic Honesty policies.

Etiquettes

Cell phones should be switched off during class. Please abstain from texting and other now habitual activities during class time, unless they are to be part of presentations and discussion.

Data Backup

Before submitting for evaluation, students are advised to make copies of all major course work for their own records.

Communication

Outside of class, students can contact me at the listed email address. All students should hear back from me within 48 hours, except during scheduled holidays. Emails should be considered ‘sent’ or ‘recorded’ *only* if they receive acknowledgment; otherwise they are lost in the ether and should be resent. All students are asked to use their newschool email accounts in communications.

COURSE SCHEDULE URBAN MEDIA LAB: WASTE

Note(s): This is a WORKING schedule and subject to revision. All changes will be made to this document on the course website, and students are advised to check it regularly. All readings will be found on the course website, unless otherwise instructed.

1.26 Hello

2.2 Base 1: Evacuations: Out of Sight, Out of Mind?

Readings

- Italo Calvino, "Continuous Cities 1 (Leonia)," *Invisible Cities* (1972) 114-116
- Mary Douglas, excerpts from Introduction and Chapter 2 "Secular Defilement," *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966)
- Mierle Laderman Ukeles. "Manifesto for Maintenance Art "(1969)

Sites, Real and Imagined (per class or email instructions, each student to take at least one)

- Benjamin Ward Richardson, "Hygeia: A City of Health" (1876)
- Kevin Lynch, "Waste Cacotopia" and "Wasteless Cacotopia," *Wasting Away* (1990)
- Fresh Kills
- Meadowlands
- Gowanus Canal
- NYC Waste Transfer Stations: Bronx Hunts Point, Brooklyn Greenpoint-Williamsburg

2.9 Base 2: Wasting Space (Heterotopias, Terrain Vagues, Drosscapes, Junkspace)

Readings

- Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias" (1967)
- Kevin Lynch, "The Waste of Place," *Places* 6.2 (1990)
- Ignasi de Sola-Morales, "Terrain Vague," *Anyplace*, Ed. Cynthia Davidson (1995)
- Alan Berger, excerpts, *Drosscape: Wasting Land in Urban America* (2006)
- Dead Malls reading TBD, likely Julia Christensen, excerpt from *Big Box Reuse* (2008)
- Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace," *October* 100 (Spring 2002) 175-90 [skim]

Sites

- Urban actions/interventions (list forthcoming)
- Find and tag at least two examples of heterotopia or terrain vague in NYC

2.16 Base 3: Material Circulations (Production, Consumption, Reuse)

Readings

- Heather Rogers, Ch 2 "Rubbish Past", Ch 4 section "Scavenging Transformed", and Ch 5 "The Golden Age of Waste" from *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage* (2005)
- Elizabeth Royte, "Quantifying in the Kitchen" from *Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash* (2005)
- Elizabeth Grossman, "Producing High Tech," from *High Tech Trash: Digital Devices, Hidden Toxics, and Human Health* (2006)
- Vance Packard, Ch 6 "Progress through Planned Obsolescence" and Ch 7 "Planned Obsolescence of Desirability", *The Waste Makers* (1960)
- TrashTrack, MIT SENSEable City Lab, <http://senseable.mit.edu/trashtrack/>

Recommended, for Add'l Context/Background

- William McDonough and Michael Braungart, "A Brief History of the Industrial Revolution" in *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (2002) 18-23
- David Harvey, Ch 8 "Fordism" (Read on Googlebooks) and Ch 9 "From Fordism to Flexible Accumulation" in *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (1990)
- Alan Berger, "Post-Fordism: Waste Landscapes of Accumulation" in *Drosscape: Wasting Land in Urban America* (2006)

Sites

- Find and tag one example of material refuse (trash) and one example of material reuse in NYC or surroundings. Try to relate your two sites – this could be done geographically (they are co-located, for

example), thematically (they both have to do with the same subject matter, but one is trash and the other is not), materially (maybe they are both made out of paper), formally (they are both the same color), or in a myriad of other ways.

2.23 **Base 4: Wasting Time (On the Other Sides of Efficiency)**

[NOTE: CLASS WILL NOT MEET – ONLINE WORK ONLY]

On waiting

- Zygmunt Bauman, excerpts from Ch4 “Culture of Waste”, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (2004) 104-113 on waiting, and 124-5 on speed dating
- Tom Vanderbilt, “Waiting in Line, Waiting in Traffic: Why the Other Lane Always Moves Faster” in *Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do (And What it Says About Us)* (2008) 40-45
- (A few add'l recommended readings on waiting for those interested: David Maister, “The Psychology of Waiting Lines” (1985) and Adam Phillips’s “On Being Bored” from *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (1993) which helps to explain the differences between waiting and boredom)

On (in)efficiencies:

- William McDonough and Michael Braungart, Ch 2 “Why Being Less Bad is No Good”, from *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (2002) *focus on definition of eco-efficiency page 51, critique of downcycling 59 (why the critique? what does this have to do with time?), and 63-67*
- Susan Strasser, “The Lure of Convenience,” from *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (1999) 181-7

Sites

- What does it mean to map time? especially time that is considered misused, lost, wasted? Document on the WASTEmap some moment(s) of wasting, wasted time.

3.2 **Base 5: Informal Cities**

Readings

- Mike Davis, Ch 6 “Slum Ecology” from *Planet of Slums* (2006) 121-50
- Teddy Cruz, “A City Made of Waste,” *The Nation* (16 February 2009)
- Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner, “Failure of the Formal,” in *Power: Producing the Contemporary City*, ed. Berlege Institute (2007) and “Co-Ownership,” *Al Manakh: Dubai Guide*, Gulf Survey, in Volume (2009) 388-93
- George Packer, “The Megacity: Decoding the Chaos of Lagos” *The New Yorker* (November 13, 2006)
- Akash Kapur, “Letter from India: Indian Scavengers Doing What Officials Can’t” *New York Times* (January 19, 2011)

Sites: This week we go global. Please investigate and tag one of the following sites on the WASTEmap. Most of these sites appear in Mike Davis’s *Planet of Slums* under his list “30 Largest Megaslums,” and a few others have been added (28). (*Note: please check the map before moving forward so as to avoid too many overlaps. It’s fine if a few sites receive multiple tags, but better to cover as many sites as possible.)

- Neza-Chalco-Izta, Mexico City
- Sadr City, Baghdad
- Soweto, Gauteng
- Orangi Township, Karachi
- Pikine, Dakar, Senegal
- Manshiet Nasser, Cairo
- Dharavi, Mumbai
- Kibera, Nairobi
- Islamshahr, Tehran
- Cite-Soleil, Port-au-Prince
- Heliopolis, Sao Paolo
- Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro
- Korail, Dhaka, Bangladesh
- Bahay Toro, Manila

3.9 **Base 6: Information Management (Information Overload, System Failures, E-Waste)**

Readings

- “The Data Deluge,” *The Economist* (25 February 2010); and “Data, Data Everywhere,” *Special*

- Report, The Economist (25 February 2010)
- Zygmunt Bauman, excerpt from introduction to *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (2004) (This is also where you will find “Waste is the dark, shameful secret of all production”)
 - Tim Jordan, highlighted sections on information overload from “Cyberpower: The Culture and Politics of Cyberspace” (1999) see 5-8 (for another version of this text, see New School Library’s electronic version of Jordan’s *Living with Cyberspace: Technology and Society in the Twenty-first Century*, 125-126)
 - Browse Jussi Parikka’s blog posts on spam, especially “More Spam to the World” and “Recycling Centre for Digital Waste, or how to stop worrying, and love spam, porn and viruses” (Jussi Parikka is one of the editors of *The Spam Book*, Hampton Press, 2009)
 - Browse Information Ecology Research Group at MIT Media Lab
 - Ann Blair, “Information Overload, Then and Now” *The Chronicle Review* (28 November 2010)
 - Jennifer Gabrys, “Media in the Dump,” *Alphabet City: Trash*, Ed. John Knechtel (2007) 156-65

Sites, in process

- Please use your site tag this week as a first step toward focusing your urban research forward for the rest of the semester. (Therefore your tag may not have anything to do with information management. Rather you are deciding how you want to proceed, and marking some place, somehow, accordingly.)

3.16 [SPRING BREAK]

PART TWO: CASE STUDIES

Shifting gears. Visit course website to review conceptual and structural guidelines for the preparation of cases studies, and to revisit explanation of case study thematics.

3.23 **Case 1: Household Refuse**

Consider among other things: the privatization of waste – ‘taking out the trash’ – garbage disposals – garbage guerrillas – garbage collection – landfills -incineration – composting – free-cycling – - -

Required reading for all

- Italo Calvino, “La Poubelle Agreee”, *The Road to San Giovanni* (1993) 93-126

Preliminary resources for case study group

- Mira Engler, Ch2 “Private Landscapes of Waste” in *Designing America’s Waste Landscapes* (2004) [note this is a google books link; here are the pages missing from google books]; see also Ch 3 Dumps and Ch 5 Sewage Treatment Plants
- Jean Brennan, *squanderless.com* (inspired by Calvino’s “La Poubelle Agreee”)
- Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), *Garbage Problems* (2002) – “an investigative curriculum about the wastes of New York City”
- The Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), *Post Consumed: The Landscape of Waste in Los Angeles* (an exhibit about the residential waste stream in Los Angeles, May-October 2008; was included in group exhibit *Into the Open: Positioning Practice* at US pavilion of Venice Architecture Biennale; includes useful inventory of trash – “What’s in the trash?”)
- William L. Rathje, *The Garbage Project* (1973-) and William L. Rathje and Cullen Murphy, *Rubbish!: The Archaeology of Garbage* (2001)
- Wang Jiuliang, “A City Besieged by Waste” (photo documentation of mounting waste problem facing Beijing) – see slide show here and video here

3.25 **Newtown Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant Visit @ noon**

3.30 **Case 2: Paper**

Consider among other things: print media – packaging – Mctrash – paper industry – hygiene – the paperless office – post-its – junk mail – paper money – -

Required for all

- Elizabeth Royte, Ch 12 “It’s Coming on Christmas” in *Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash* (2005)
- Susan Strasser, “Cleanliness and Paper Products” in *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (1999) 173-181

Group 2 preliminary resources

- David M. Henken, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (1998)
- Witold Rybczynski, "We are What We Throw Away," *New York Times* (5 July 1992)
- William Davies King, *Collections of Nothing* (2008) and see NPR story here and NYTimes book review here
- Sellen and Harper, *The Myth of the Paperless Office* (2002)
- *The Industrial Book, 1840-1880*, Ed. Scott E. Casper (2007) – see for example, Michael Winship's "Manufacturing and Book Production"
- HA Schult, *Now!* (1983) (paper river in NYC made of old issues of *New York Times* - look for news coverage January 1983, article Thomas Hoepker) and other projects including *Trash People* (1996) and *Save the Beach Hotel* (2010), see <http://www.haschult.de/>
- Susan Coolen, *Pliez*, see project website and documentation in *Alphabet City: Trash* (2001)
- David Macaulay, *Motel of the Mysteries* (1979)
- Jennifer Gabrys, "Leaflet Drop: The Paper Landscapes of War" *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture* (2004)

4.6 **Case 3: Metal, Glass, **Plastic**

Consider among other things: disposables and the culture of convenience - water bottles – take-out - Tupperware – toys – plastic surgery – toxicity (BPA scares and other) – inflatables – - -

Required for all

- Roland Barthes, "Plastic" in *Mythologies* (1972)
- Jeffrey L. Meikle, Introduction, *American Plastic: A Cultural History* (1997)

Group 3 preliminary resources

- Elizabeth Royte, "Satan's Resin" in *Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash* (2005) 176-194
- Heather Rogers, "Plastics" in *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage* (2005)
- Gay Hawkins, "Plastic Bags: Living with Rubbish," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 4.1 (2001)
- Tomas Saraceno, *museo aero solar*, see also www.air-port-city.org and coverage of the project at the Walker Art Center, see also Saraceno's other work with plastic here

4.13 **Film: Manufactured Landscapes, Dir. Jennifer Baichwal (Zeitgeist Films, 2006)**

4.20 [NO CLASS]

4.27 **Case 5: Electronic Waste**

Consider among other things: e-waste – format obsolescence – dead media – delete

Required for all

- Elizabeth Grossman, Ch 1 "The Underside of High-Tech," *High Tech Trash: Digital Devices, Hidden Toxics, and Human Health* (2006)
- Lisa Parks, "Falling Apart: Electronics Salvaging and the Global Media Economy" In Charles R. Aclund, ed., *Residual Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007): 32-47 (See other chapters in this collection as well)
- Heather Rogers, "Consume Locally, Dump Globally" in *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Trash* (2005) 200-205

Group 5 preliminary resources

- Giles Slade, *Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America* (Harvard University Press, 2006)
- Richard Maxwell & Toby Miller, "E-Waste: Elephant in the Living Room" *FlowTV* (December 2, 2008).
- Basel Action Network's "Exporting Harm: The High-Tech Trashing of Asia" (February 25, 2002; see also film trailer here and stream film here) and "Digital Dump: Exporting Re-use and Abuse to Africa" (24 October 2005; see also film trailer here and stream film here)
- Gopal Krishna, "E-Waste: Computers and Toxicity in India," *Sarai Reader: Shaping Technologies* (2003)
- Adam Knee, "Celebrity Skins," *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture* (2006)

5.4 **Case 4: Street Basket Waste**

Consider among other things: street cleaning – street cleaners – litter – sanitary reform – Keep America Beautiful campaign – green-washing – dumpster diving – -

Required for all

- Heather Rogers, “Green Machine”, *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage* (2005), 141-6 (and see *Keep America Beautiful Inc.*)
- Michelle Coyne, “From Production to Destruction to Recovery: Freeganism’s Redefinition of Food Value and Circulation” *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 10 (2009)
- TrashTrack, MIT SENSEable City Lab (you’ve already seen this project in Base 3, but worth a revisit!)
- JooYoun Paek and David Jimison, “Too Smart Trashcan” (2009) (scroll down, 2nd project listed), and see video proposal for project here

Group 4 preliminary resources

- Susan Strasser, excerpts from Ch 4 “Trash and Refuse Transformed”, *Waste and Want: a Social History of Trash* (1999) 118-25
- Tina Kendall, “Utopia Gleaners” in *Alphabet City: Trash* (2007) 222-9
- Heather Rogers, “Message in a Bottle” *Alphabet City: Trash*, Ed. John Knechtel (2007) 112-31
- Laurie Essig, “Fine Diving,” *Salon* (10 June 2002)
- See additional bibliographies on dumpster diving at Michael Kucher, *Student Bibliographies for a Natural History of Garbage* (Winter 2001)

5.11 **Last Class: Compilation**

5.16 **Last Day to Submit Final Case Study**