

ARCH 4204/5204 PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

University of North Carolina at Charlotte, School of Architecture
Instructor: Thomas Forget, Associate Professor
Fall 2018 Syllabus; 3 Credits; Tuesdays, 2:30–5:15



NYC Subway

PREMISE This seminar explores the history of public transportation in the United States from three primary perspectives: public policy, technology, and aesthetics. Policy issues include: the social justice (or lack thereof) of public investment; private/corporate investment and malfeasance; and grassroots initiatives in service of just transportation policy. Technological issues include: the degree of innovation in the history of public transportation infrastructure relative to that in the history of infrastructure serving private automobiles; the evolution of information technology in public infrastructural systems; and the ways in which technological developments both catalyzed new development and mediated existing problems. Aesthetic issues include: the extent to which the spaces of transportation infrastructure produce opportunities for community and social engagement, as opposed to alienation; the ways in which the material constructions of transportation infrastructure build civic identity and inspire design trends; and the ways in which reciprocities between natural and built geographies manifest the spatial logic of a region—its scales, proportions, hierarchies, and means of connectivity. Overall, the course strives to examine public infrastructure as a vital participant in the social, political, and economic dynamics—as something that transcends the functions of a rote public utility and achieve a qualitative role in culture.

OBJECTIVES The primary objective of this course is to develop a critical understanding of the role of public transportation in the development of the American city. Secondary objectives are:

- to discern how the history of that development informs the contemporary city
- to develop analytical and critical writing skills
- to integrate graphic analysis into written research

STRUCTURE The course begins with a two-week introductory survey of public transportation in the United States writ large. The rest of the first-half of the semester is devoted to an in-depth comparative case study of the New York City Subway and the Paris Metro, including the bus and regional rail services that complement those metropolitan systems. Students complete research-based midterm projects on particular aspects of the New York-Paris comparison. The instructor will assign topics that contribute to research being conducted for an upcoming book, the focus of which is the interplay between the social and technological conditions of the currently crumbling New York City Subway.

The second half of the semester consists of case studies of other major transit systems in the United States, with a special emphasis on how they compare to the New York system, which accounts for the vast majority of ridership in the nation. This survey covers both canonical and historically significant systems (e.g., Boston and Chicago) and ones that have gained significance more recently (e.g., Los Angeles and Portland). Special emphasis is placed on the resonance between transportation infrastructure and landscape urbanism. The course concludes with an inquiry into the troubled case of the Charlotte, including site visits and guest speakers on the Blue Line Extension. Students complete final papers on a topic of their choice, which is expected to include a graphic analysis.

In addition to a midterm research project and a final paper/graphic analysis, students execute various forms of writing that fulfill the writing-intensive (W) objective of the course (e.g., low stakes writing exercises and the submission of drafts and rewrites of midterm projects and final papers). Each graduate student enrolled in the course will lead one discussion in the second half of the semester on a sub-topic related to the week's case study.