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Ferguson Academic Seed Fund Grant, December 2, 2015: *Invisible* Cities (Revised proposal)

Purpose of the grant and outcomes

I seek a Ferguson Academic Seed Fund grant to develop a cross-disciplinary seminar (for fall 2016 or spring 2017) at Washington University titled *Invisible* Cities. The course will examine facets of ‘invisibility’ as a spatial, political and social condition of suppression marked by mainstream redevelopment in American cities like St. Louis (but existing, in fact, in all American cities). My goal is to use the class as a forum to frame, collect and document the various manifestations of invisibility as it exists in mechanisms of daily governance (ie right before our eyes). Depending on further funding, the perspectives and insights garnered from the class and readings will later be developed into an exhibit of drawings and/or publication (article).

Course goals

The course proposed will cover theoretical approaches and discourses of urban inequality (and invisibility) as it will also introduce practical (graphic) methods for visualizing the underpinnings of redevelopment (and invisibility). The aim of the course is to make visible or apparent to students what are otherwise opaque processes of urban design, governance and redevelopment. How is urban invisibility produced, and in what spaces? Vs how is it lived? (This answer differs depending on one’s relationship to processes producing the condition). How does invisibility manifest spatially and socially? Who is left out of policy decisions? Who bears burdens of redevelopment as “progress”? Who remains and who is erased as cities grow and shrink?

Course participants and content

The course will be open to graduate architecture, landscape architecture and urban design students plus advanced undergraduate students from across campus (preference will be given to undergraduate students in urban studies, architecture students, and those pursuing the urban design minor). The course could also accommodate graduate social work and humanities students with interests in urban issues and community development. Coursework will include readings (and or local guest lectures) curated from across fields that could include: anthropology (Setha Low on gated communities, Bret Gustafson on social movements), planning and architecture (Amhorst/ Theodore/ D’Oca’s work on the Arsenal of Exclusion/Inclusion in public spaces), public policy (Swanstrom/ Hayward’s “thick injustice” in the American Metropolis), history (Nathan Conolly’s work on racism, real estate and politics, Colin Gordon’s work “mapping decline”), law (Frug’s work on city powerlessness), art (Theaster Gate’s critical work bridging art and community building, Jennifer Colton Schmidt’s work on erased landscapes); others.

The readings, discussions and final projects in the course will be loosely structured according to three preliminary frameworks, with the intent to tighten these over the next year under the aegis of the grant: 1. Invisibility as a condition that marks the poor and underclass in cities by way of their literal erasure off maps through urban redevelopment (erasure urbanism); 2. Invisibility as it relates to mainstream urban metrics and recording systems that leave out entire populations (like the homeless left out of census data, other informal migrant and transient groups existing under the radar); 3. Invisibility as a construct—created via policy cracks and hidden legislative spaces or back-stage political arenas—where entire groups may exist but whose needs persistently are neglected—or intentionally diverted. Another component of the course (and product) may explore the ways in which invisibility is then countered or brought to light through design provocations, visibility campaigns, social movements and media etc.

Course outcomes

The final project for the class will be an in-depth research project in the form of either a mapping (research-drawing/for design students) or text (research paper/ for humanities and other students)—or a combined team effort between interdisciplinary groups—that makes visible the various manifestations of invisibility on particular sites in St. Louis. Project sites (starter list) will include: Kinloch, MO; Ferguson, MO, McRee Town, St. Louis, Maplewood, MO and others to be added the organizational framework is solidified. Given the range of technical abilities between students across disciplines, I plan to tailor projects towards students’ disciplinary strengths, so they can learn from each other’s approaches, while also offering them chances to learn new tools and methods outside of their repertoire.

While I do not anticipate the course engaging directly with any of the communities we will study, the lessons learned and techniques explored in the course will have both practical and theoretical value to students’ understandings and abilities to engage these contexts as future urbanists, policy makers, designers or community advocates and citizens.

Intellectual underpinnings

Since 2010, my work has explored the political and legal mechanisms of development in St. Louis that produce erasure and that destabilize already weak communities around the region. My projects on “erasure urbanism” highlight the processes that effectively stage the replacement of poorer (mostly African American) communities around St. Louis such as Kinloch, MO, a — now invisible—municipality on Ferguson’s western boundary, that was slowly bought out and razed in the late 1990’s as part of an airport expansion plan that instead led to visions of industrial warehouses to attract Chinese commerce to the region.

The field of urban design puts emphasis on urban form as a primary construct of the city. My work as a designer focuses on moving the discipline beyond this understanding alone, towards a broader conceptualization that includes the underlying forces shaping space. I understand sites as a product of overlaid agendas, masked spaces and as territories of contestation between the visible and the invisible. (Visibility—invisibilization and visibilization—becomes an apparatus of power).

I use drawing and mapping techniques to uncover the mechanisms shaping such sites (and shaping design)—many which exist outside of design, like law, policy, real estate development and many of which are also largely ‘invisible’ (until construction starts). *I seek to make visible the making of invisibility.* The Invisible\Cities course will introduce students to the practice of drawing as a means to effectively spatialize and visualize what is otherwise not always apparent.

Milestones/timeline, deliverables, budget

I will develop the course over the next year, working largely during the summer with assistants to help conduct research around the course and topics, research, and gather course materials. A portion of summer salary is included since this is the most productive time I can spend developing the course.

Budget Summary:

Partial summer salary towards time dedicated to research, and managing assistants	\$1,500
Research assistant/s	\$5,500
Printing/materials/books	\$ 500
<u>Total grant</u>	<u>= \$7,500</u>
+Additional Research Assistant time (1 undergraduate or graduate)	+ \$3,000
<u>Total:</u>	<u>\$ 10,500</u>