From the streets of Hong Kong, Barcelona, Beirut, and Santiago to the parks and alleys of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, urban public space currently holds our attention as a constitutive context of political expression, everyday survival, and future-oriented politics. These examples are simply the most recent iterations of the longstanding and ever-changing relationship between urban space, publics, and the political. Literatures that have explored this nexus have conceptualized public space in relation to the political theory of the public sphere, to various forms of (in)justice, and to the social constructivist concept of spatiality. Thus, they have critically explored the liberal ideal of parks, plazas, streets, alleys, beaches, bikeways, transit systems, libraries, pop-up art shows, playgrounds, municipal buildings, etc. as sites that are equally accessible to all. In turn, these literatures have also critically considered public spaces in relations to questions of: memory, ceremony, and commemoration; order and diversity; identity and difference; neoliberalization and privatization; securitization and militarization; occupation, ‘commoning,’ rights claims; artistic production; and the formation of publics and counterpublics, among other themes. Yet, despite the proliferation of literatures on public space over at least the last thirty years, there remain numerous opportunities for further exploration and conversation.

This discussion-based graduate course will explore literatures that critically engage with questions of public space and the political in fields including geography, sociology, urban studies, and political theory. It will provide a context for discussions of how we might conceptualize and research the publics/space nexus. It will be guided, but not limited, by questions including: How are publicness and the political conceptualized in urban studies, sociology and political/social theory? How does politics operate in and through the everyday use and experience of public spaces, tensions between use(r)s, design & governance institutions/innovations, and rights / justice claims? How are publics and counter-publics constituted in reference to privatized spaces, networks, and corporations? What roles do references to ideal futures, past politics, & ‘best practice’ models from other cities play in shaping the politics of public space?

* Syllabus developed in collaboration with Friederike Landau, Lise Mahieus, & Baharak Yousefi.
Evaluation

Students will be evaluated on:

- Thorough reading of the weekly assignments & conscientious participation in all class discussions and activities, including leading discussion of some readings (25%).

- Submission, via Canvas, by 9am on Thursdays each week, of two responses to the readings, each 250-500 words long, engaging critically with, making connections among, and asking questions based on the arguments in the texts (25%). *Note: These will be shared with all participants and are a requirement of participation even for those auditing or sitting in on the course. Responses are not required in the first week.

- Writing a substantial paper of journal article style and length (c. 6,000 – 8,500 words, including references), based on the themes of the course and presentation of an in-progress summary and a final version to the class (50%).

Expectations

Graduate reading and discussion-based courses are valuable because they provide opportunities to read widely and deeply, to engage with ideas and theories, to think creatively, and to discuss ideas with peers. This course is designed to allow this sort of ‘big thinking’ around its central themes. It is framed by a generally critical perspective – one that balances critique of how the world is and how we understand it with a commitment to generating ideas and approaches that better explain it and maybe even aid in changing it for the better.

Most of us are geographers and most of the readings will have a geographical element to them. But this is an interdisciplinary group and geography is an ‘interdisciplinary discipline.’ So we don’t limit ourselves to work from the discipline of geography. But we limit ourselves to literatures that build on critical social theory perspectives of one form or another.

Each of us has the opportunity to refine our own understanding of the material, to help others think through questions, and to practice valuable analytic and communication skills. The course will work best if we all approach it with a willingness to engage in open and respectful discussion. By participating in the course, we all agree to the following principles: We will be welcoming to all. We will listen more than we talk, we won’t hog the floor when we are speaking, and we won’t interrupt or disparage others.
Discussion topics & readings (tentative)

Jan 9  
Introduction

Jan 16  
Theorizing public space in the 1990s

Optional:

Jan 23  
Political theories of publics & public spheres

Optional:

Jan 30  
The expanding discussion of public space
Feb 6 The ‘being together of strangers’? Publics, space, & the politics of difference

Feb 13 A ‘resurgent debate’ two decades later: Theme issue of EPA: Economy & Space: Problems, Publicity and Public Space

Feb 20 ~Reading break. No class meeting.~

Feb 27 Counterpublics & countercspaces
Each student will read two of the following:

“DUE: Students writing a paper for the course will submit a two-page summary by the beginning of class today and present an oral summary to the class~

Mar 5 Agonism, memorialization, & public art

Mar 12 Publics/space & the ‘cosmopolitan canopy’

Mar 19 Publics/Space Potluck I (Readings to be chosen by course participants)

**Mar 26**  
**Publics/Space Potluck I (Readings to be chosen by course participants)**  

**Apr 2**  
**No class meeting (SFU Geography external review)**

**Apr 9**  
**Presentations**  
- Students writing a paper for the course will give a 15 min conference-style presentation in class. Time will be allotted for comments and questions.

**Apr 20**  
“DUE: Final papers, via Canvas, by 5pm~