

home is where the park is

navigating the multiplicity of needs in public space



Photo by Where Do We Go Berkeley, 2019

course overview

Landscape architecture often presents itself as an altruistic profession, designing spaces for beauty, nature, and leisure, with the claim that these spaces are for “all.” We’re taught to see parks as inherently good and neutral, yet this view can obscure the complexities of public space, ignoring that these areas may not meet the needs of the communities they’re meant to serve. Public spaces, and the very definition of “public,” are more complex than they’re often portrayed, and landscape architecture can sometimes be exclusionary, benefiting specific groups while overlooking others.

This studio will critically examine how landscape architecture addresses—or fails to address—the needs of the public. Students will explore the historical and contemporary definitions of “public,” considering who is included and who is excluded. We will apply these insights to existing public spaces in Vancouver through site visits, analyzing whether current policies and designs meet the community's needs.

Engaging with themes like displacement, houselessness, climate change, and decolonization, students will explore the competing interests within public spaces. We’ll critically assess traditional landscape architecture methodologies and consider community-centered approaches that address emerging needs for survival, climate resilience, and communal healing.

This process-based studio will guide students from early research to final design outcomes, focusing on the realities in Vancouver while also allowing for speculative design. Our goal is not to solve these complex issues but to participate in the conversation, using our skills to imagine spaces that prioritize inclusivity, care, and hope.

guiding questions

- Who is the public?
- What constitutes a public space? Are these spaces truly open to the “public”?
- What are current methodologies in landscape architecture/planning that drive the decisions we make as designers designing public space for the public?
- What are the major conflicts in needs/uses that we see today in public space? How do we navigate and reconcile these conflicting interests & needs?

context & site

In the early semester we will be visiting and critically examining numerous public spaces throughout Vancouver. Later into the semester we will be focusing on CRAB Park, the location of Canada’s first legal encampment located in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. We will examine CRAB Park both in its context as a public recreational space, and as a space for survival. Throughout the class, we will be learning from community members, knowledge holders, housing advocates, academics, and neighbours.

schedule (schedule is subject to change)

part 1 | what is the foundation (approximately 3 weeks)

In the first three weeks of class, we will explore the philosophical foundations of public, public space, and the right to land. Students will begin by reflecting on what these concepts mean to them, contextualizing this in the public spaces that are a part of their communities. As we start to develop an understanding of these themes, we will then begin to spatialize these concepts by visiting several public spaces in Vancouver. An initial assignment will involve group work where a site is chosen and community needs are identified, compared and contrasted.

part 2 | rooting theory to place (approximately 4 weeks)

Students will conduct a comprehensive site analysis of CRAB Park, including a physical model building, context analysis, and a media analysis. Guest lectures will provide insights into the history of CRAB Park, the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood, and the current context of encampments in Vancouver. After learning from community members, a class charette will be held to identify key needs of the space, such as access to water, sanitation, outdoor living spaces, and safety, etc.—leading to a catalogue of design precedents addressing these needs. The culmination of this work will help to determine the direction for the design-based portion of the studio.

part 3 | imagining new futures (approximately 6 weeks)

Rooted in a speculative scenario, the final design project will examine how we create designs that can adapt to the emerging needs of a community. Exploring overt and subversive strategies, students will be invited to consider their reflections from previous class discussions and develop a design that addresses theories of displacement, climate resiliency, and inclusivity.