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Background into Foreground: Film as a Medium for Teaching Urban Design

Roy Strickland



After World War II, advances in film technology, especially increasingly small and mobile cameras, enabled filmmakers to break out of the studio lot and shoot on location, at first combining location and stage work, but eventually shooting films almost entirely in their actual settings. These settings were often cities, whose complex and dramatic environments provided natural locations for films emphasizing realistic plots and characters.¹ In the 1940s and 1950s Italian Neo-Realism and American Film Noir helped establish this on-location tradition, and it has been carried to the present by filmmakers such as Wim Wenders, Wayne Wang, and Spike Lee.

Given cities' important role in film and the medium's particularly vivid and kinetic depiction of cities, films provide a rich resource for the teaching of urban design. This article discusses ten films screened in the University of Michigan's Master of Urban Design Program's introductory studio for their lessons about the intersection between urban form and social life. After summarizing the reasons for using film in urban design studio, it describes the criteria used to select films, identifies some of their lessons (which are revealed through viewing exercises), and concludes with a reflection on the value of film in teaching urban design.

Film as Part of Urban Design Studio

Like most American urban design programs, Michigan's provides a brief, intensive, post-professional course of study. Studios are central to the two-and-one-half-term curriculum, and are accompanied by courses in history, theory and practice. During the program's first studio, films with urban settings are screened on an almost weekly basis as part of a discussion section.

There are compelling reasons for showing films in studio, especially as students begin urban design. Their narratives help introduce the complex intersection of urban form and social life that designers should address as they shape the environment; their cameras capture the city from metropolitan to architectural scales, the realm within which urban designers practice; and, for students who come from all over the world, they are a means of fostering a common, global experience with cities without leaving the studio.²

To extract lessons from the films in the Michigan course, students are given exercises that focus on interpreting their locations, followed up with group discussions. Some of these exercises are described here, including drawing plans, sections and elevations of a film's settings; or assuming the identity of a character and describing his or her relation to the surrounding urban environment.

The Films

The films selected from the Michigan filmography for this article were all produced between 1949 and 2005. They represent a variety of genres (drama, thriller, romantic comedy, docudrama, etc.), but are consistently effective in their depiction of cities and the manners in which people inhabit them. As are all the films shown in urban design studio, they were selected for four reasons: they were shot primarily, if not entirely on location³; they portray people actively engaged in claiming and using urban space; they show not only urban exteriors and interiors but also interstitial spaces such as lobbies, halls and stairways; and they were filmed in a variety of cities around the world.

In order of their release, the films are *The Naked City* (1949, New York City; Jules Dassin director); *The Third Man* (1949, Vienna; Carol Reed); *Battle of Algiers* (1966, Algiers; Gillo Pontecorvo); *Wings of Desire* (1987, Berlin; Wim Wenders); *Salaam Bombay* (1988, Bombay; Mira Nair); *Do the Right Thing* (1989, Brooklyn; Spike Lee); *Love Jones* (1997, Chicago; Theodore Witcher); *Chinese Box* (1999, Hong Kong; Wayne Wang); *Beijing Bicycle* (2001, Beijing; Wang Xiaoshuai); and *Crash* (2005, Los Angeles; Michael Haggis).

Streets, Blocks and Buildings: *The Naked City*

Urban films often open with “establishing” shots that characterize their locations. For the films discussed here, these include footage of New York’s skyline; Vienna’s church spires; the port, Casbah, and European settlement of Algiers; Los Angeles’ freeways; and Berlin’s rooftops. Usually taken from the air, these shots capture general patterns in city form—streets, blocks and buildings—that will be revealed in greater detail as their narratives unfold.

The Naked City, an early example of American on-location shooting, opens with New York as seen from a plane, as the sound of the propellers mixes with a narrator’s voice-over to help establish the film’s self-professed realism. Delivering on its promise, the film then provides a scrupulous portrait of the city that illustrates the relationships among streets, blocks and buildings that are fundamental to urbanism.

Tracing the manhunt for a young Manhattan woman’s killer, the film culminates in a shootout on the towers of the Williamsburg Bridge, high above the East River. Beforehand, however, as detectives crisscross the city, they interact with a cross-section of New Yorkers—from laborers to socialites—occupying nineteenth-century Lower East Side tenements, early-twentieth-century Park Avenue apartment houses, and 1930s midtown office skyscrapers.



As shown in the film, New York’s street and block system, seen first from the air, encompasses a wide range of buildings, activities and social groups, creating distinct neighborhoods. These nevertheless cohere into a larger urban whole because of a prevailing urbanism of 200-by-800-foot blocks, party-wall building construction, and consistent density.

Viewing exercise: Sketch the streets where *The Naked City*’s characters (the murder victim, the young detective, the primary suspect) live or work, and be prepared to compare and contrast the building types, uses, and landscape elements along these streets.

Lesson: An urban street and block diagram as abstract and two-dimensional as a grid can achieve richness and nuance with time and use.

Curbs, Sidewalks and Steps: *Do the Right Thing*

Do the Right Thing puts the street and block under a microscope to reveal the multiple thresholds and spatial claims that support their inhabitation.

The film follows Brooklyn residents and shop owners at work and play on a block of row houses and tenements during a hot summer weekend. The block’s every stoop, windowsill, shop awning, parked car, tree bed, and garden fence are shown to demarcate the spatial domains of varying age and ethnic groups. Teenagers lounge on fire escapes; children dart between cars and open fire hydrants; elders lean against windowsills and garden fences; and

Opposite: *Crash*. Car as private space within public domain of the street.

© Lionsgate Entertainment

Above: *Do the Right Thing*. Claiming space on a city block’s stoops and fire escapes.

© Universal Cities Studios, Inc.

shopkeepers vigilantly watch their front sidewalks. Ultimately, this tenuous social equilibrium, composed of visible—and invisible—thresholds between the block’s occupants, is broken by underlying social antagonisms, and the film culminates when intergenerational and racial tensions explode in a riot.

Reinforcing *The Naked City*’s lesson about a “simple” street system’s potential for richness, *Do the Right Thing* portrays the manners in which hierarchies of public and private space, laid upon its street system through architecture, landscape and human activity, can give a city an extremely fine grain.

Viewing exercise: Draw a plan of the street in *Do the Right Thing*, including buildings, spatial demarcations, and landscape elements, and list all the activities occurring on the street and their locations.

Lesson: Multiple spatial definitions, social claims, and human activities can occur within the limitations of urban dimensions.

Windows: *The Third Man*

Walls and windows frame the streets in *The Naked City* and *Do the Right Thing*. In both films, windows give glimpses of rooms, shops and people behind the walls—just as from interiors they afford views of streets and passersby. As the films show, public and private life in cities may be separated by no more than a street wall, allowing windows to express both separation and linkage.

In *The Third Man*, a thriller set in immediate post-World War II Vienna, street-wall windows play a prominent part in the narrative. The film follows Allied occupational authorities as they pursue a notorious racketeer through the city’s medieval center and nineteenth-century Ringstrasse. By speaking with or observing people through windows, the film’s characters make tactical decisions about the chase, setting in motion plot twists that eventually lead to the racketeer’s capture.

Viewing exercise: Draw a section through buildings to either side of a street in *The Third Man*, with particular attention to walls and windows overlooking the street, and note people’s use of windows in the film’s narrative.

Lesson: Street-wall windows bridge immediately adjacent private and public spaces and enable people to occupy both realms simultaneously, a subtle and sometimes precarious condition of urban life.



Above: *The Third Man*. The urban window facilitating simultaneous occupancy of public (exterior) and private (interior) space. © Canal + Image U.K. Ltd. and the Criterion Collection.

Halls, Lobbies and Courts: *Battle of Algiers*

Cameras in urban films cross skylines, streets, and windowsills. They also move up and down stairs, hover over lobbies, and glide through halls to show how interstices in the city’s spatial hierarchy are rich and interesting places in their own right. In these spaces, the sounds of apartment life extend beyond closed doors to lay domestic claim to stair landings (*Naked City*); children play on steps to bring street activities into buildings (*Do the Right Thing*); and people cross paths in building lobbies as if in a small public square (*Third Man*). Ambiguously public and private, interstices are shown to contribute complexity to both the city’s spatial diagram and the experience of urban life.

Perhaps no film makes this point more clearly than the docudrama *Battle of Algiers*, a reenactment of the Algerian revolution. As guerrillas and French paratroopers race back and forth between the Casbah in the hills and European settlement below, the courtyards of the indigenous North African houses provide shelter for family and community life amidst escalating violence. In *Algiers*, the courtyard is the setting for cooking, childrearing, and family celebrations (and, as the film duly notes, the clandestine meetings of insurgents).

Viewing exercise: Draw plans or sections of a courtyard house as shown in *Battle of Algiers* and identify and locate the different activities it contains.

Lesson: Interstices can play as intricate and powerful a part in urban life as the dwelling, street or square.

Opposite: *Battle of Algiers*. Interstice as ritual space: courtyard during wedding prayers. © Casbah Films, Inc. and the Criterion Collection.



Street Furniture: *Salaam Bombay*

In the Casbah and the Lower East Side, shops push display tables into the streets. In Brooklyn, a grocery spreads vegetable stands under awnings. In Vienna, a café extends tables and chairs into a square. As films shot in these locations illustrate, street furniture may extend a commercial or social claim on public space and become woven into urban life. In the films, it provides a setting for meetings (*Third Man*), cultural exchange and confrontation (*Do the Right Thing*), information gathering (*Naked City*), and political action (*Battle of Algiers*)—all in addition to its service function.

In *Salaam Bombay* the role of street furniture in urban life is even more pronounced. The story involves a boy abandoned in the Indian countryside, and portrays his struggle to develop a livelihood and constitute a surrogate family from among the peddlers, prostitutes, and street children of Bombay's slums.

In the tenement blocks that are the film's primary setting, canopies, tarps, sheets and blankets hang from building walls and balconies to provide shade for the carts, bins and tables of vendors selling everything from refreshments to electronics. Rolled out or back as needed, fabric and furniture may fundamentally alter the dimensions, use and image of the

street according to the time of day or weather.

Viewing exercise: Draw an elevation of a tenement block in *Salaam Bombay* and show types, locations and uses of accompanying street furniture.

Lesson: As much as buildings, streets and sidewalks, street furniture can help determine the shape, character and use of urban space.

Sounds: *Chinese Box*

In *The Naked City*, *Do the Right Thing*, *The Third Man*, and *Battle of Algiers*, the sounds of the street—voices, footsteps, traffic—interject themselves on interiors. As the films suggest, ambient noises are integral to urban life, as made strikingly clear in *Chinese Box*.

Set in 1997 as Hong Kong is transferred from English to Chinese rule, the film captures the noise of cars, planes, boats, fireworks, sirens, chimes, whistles, crying babies, etc. that intrude on or recede from people's debates about politics, economics and personal relationships. In the soundtrack, the recurring crash of a construction-site pile driver provides a metaphorical heartbeat for the film's two major characters: a dying English journalist and the dynamic city where he has made his home.

In Hong Kong, *Chinese Box* demonstrates, conversa-



tions and personal reflections are set within a *mélange* of sounds traveling down the alleys, up the balconies, and through the casement windows of the city's dense, yet permeable urban fabric.

Viewing exercise: Assume the character of the English journalist in *Chinese Box*, list the sounds he hears, and identify their relationships to his activities and states of mind.

Lesson: Because of their prevalence in cities, sounds are inseparable from people's relationship to urbanism.

Cars: *Crash*

As urban films show, cars contribute greatly to a city's activity, congestion and noise. By creating contrasts between heavily and less trafficked streets (French-inspired boulevards and indigenous pedestrian passages in Algiers; eight-lane arterials and market alleys in Hong Kong; north-south avenues and east-west side streets in Manhattan) moving cars help give texture and variety by differentiating urban spaces and neighborhoods one from the next. Meanwhile, at rest, they become street furniture. In *Do the Right Thing*, for example, parked cars separate street from sidewalk and take their place alongside shop awnings, display racks, and lawn chairs as social and commercial claims on public space.

Los Angeles is, of course, the most car-oriented of cities, and the car's role in urban space and social life is at the center of *Crash*. After establishing shots of streaming

Above: *Salaam Bombay*. Urban space as shaped by street furniture. © Channel Four Television Company Limited, Cadrage S.A., National Film Development Corporation, Ltd. and Mirabai Films, Inc.

Below: *Chinese Box*. The city carved from sound. © WW Productions, Inc., Le Studio Canal + NDF International Ltd.



head- and taillights on nighttime freeways, the film tracks hitherto unrelated Angelinos—a pair of young criminals, a district attorney and his wife, a doctor and her father, the owner of a convenience store, a television producer and his wife, several policeman, and a locksmith and his family—as they cross paths following a car-jacking and give vent to ethnic and racial antagonisms.

For the people in *Crash*, cars serve as a private space for sexual relations within the public space of the street; provide class and race signifiers in a socially and racially stratified city; and offer safe space within a threatening urban environment.

Viewing exercise: Describe the ways in which cars are used by characters in *Crash*; identify the kinds of cars shown in the film and what they signify to their drivers and to others.

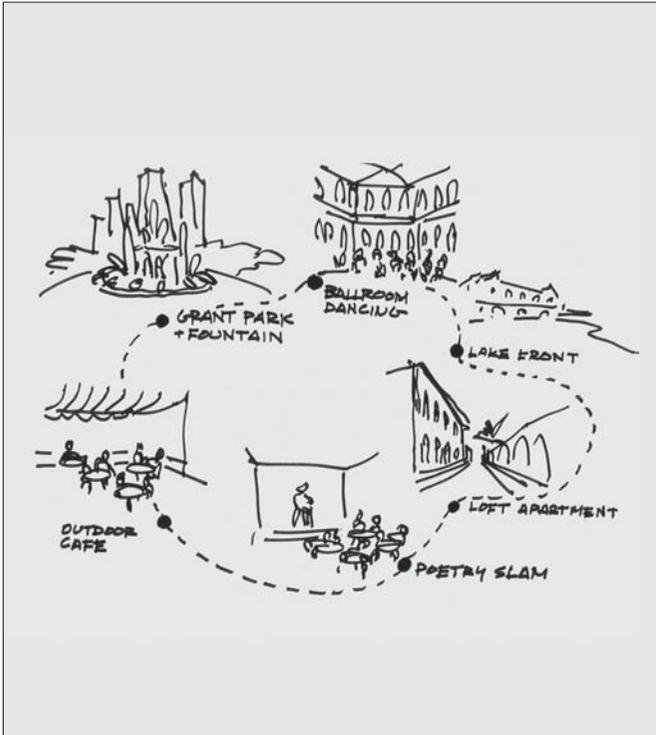
Lesson: Cars are not merely transportation, but play social, aesthetic, and spatial-ordering roles in cities.

Edges and Gaps: *Beijing Bicycle*

Films often use urban edges and gaps, from empty lots to riverfronts, in their narratives. At the end of *Crash*, a socially repressed television producer who has finally acted on his frustrations stops at an empty shoulder of road to join in the free play of a group of boys surrounding an abandoned, burning car. In *The Naked City*, the parents of the young murder victim reflect on her life as they sit at the river's edge. In *Do the Right Thing* three men set up lawn chairs along the blank sidewall of a building at a street corner to observe and comment on their neighbors. In these films, urban edges and gaps enable characters to withdraw to spaces outside the purview and interference of others to play, reflect, and engage in benign and/or illicit activities.

For the adolescents in *Beijing Bicycle* such spaces afford the opportunity to organize their own society. The film follows an ongoing fight between a messenger boy and a high-school student after each claims possession of a bicycle that has been stolen from the first and sold to the second. As they chase each other across the city on bicycle and foot, they cross a network of spaces claimed by adolescents, such as rail sidings, construction sites, highway underpasses, and river edges. These are risky environments

Above: *Beijing Bicycle*. Urban gap of railroad tracks as adolescent free space.
© Arc Light Films



that adults avoid, freeing them to be claimed by teenagers, who use them to socialize, fight, bargain and dispense justice.

Viewing exercise: List the places where adolescents congregate in *Beijing Bicycle* and note the ways they are used.

Lesson: Urban gaps and edges that may be outwardly peripheral and neutral are potentially central to the experience of the city for people who use them according to need and invest them with importance.

Maps: *Love Jones*

By claiming and connecting their city's edges and gaps, the teenagers in *Beijing Bicycle* create their own map of the city. Since this map reflects the needs and activities of their particular social group, it may be imperceptible to outsiders.

Differentiation between maps is a common theme in urban films. The murderer in *The Naked City* thinks New York "beautiful" because it contains so many places unknown to the police, where he can hide. The racketeer

Above: *Love Jones*. Sketch of one social group's map of Chicago, derived from film viewing exercise.

Opposite: *Wings of Desire*. The city in memory. © Road Movies Film Production GMBH and Argos Films, Paris.

in *The Third Man* uses the underground world of Vienna's sewers to evade authorities. In *Battle of Algiers*, contrasts between the narrow, twisting passages of the Casbah and the broad avenues of the French quarter give the revolutionaries an initial advantage: the colonists' map of Paris-like streets is easy to read, while the routes of the insurgents resist discovery by the authorities.

In *Love Jones*, a romantic comedy set in Chicago, a coterie of friends and acquaintances, all in their twenties and thirties, inhabit poetry clubs, outdoor cafes, record shops, photo studios, and residential lofts where they engage in discussions of art, love, politics and sex. Against the backdrop of the city's skyline, they occupy an alternative environment carved from Chicago's former industrial landscape, where bleak, even intimidating, streets and buildings offer warm and vibrant interiors, rich in color, music and conversation. Among sophisticated people like these, it is possible to construct a map of parties, cultural experiences, and taste choices tied together by taxi and motorcycle trips. Their world exists in stark contrast to that occupied by one group-member's photographic subjects: poor and working-class people isolated on the city's South Side.

Viewing exercise: Draw a map of the activities of the friends in *Love Jones*, noting the kinds of buildings and streets that contain them and the means of traveling between them.

Lesson: Individuals and affinity groups construct their own, nonofficial maps of cities, the layering of which contributes to urban complexity and meaning.

Thought and Memory: *Wings of Desire*

In the film *Wings of Desire* angels hover over Berlin. With the power to read people's minds, they reveal the city as a crisscrossing of streams of consciousness. From this vantage, they see Berliners going about their daily lives, speaking to themselves about politics, family, mortality and desire, and creating private emotional spaces for reflection, often stimulated by the streets, buildings and landmarks around them.

These reflections move back and forth in time—the cosmopolitan Berlin before World War II; the city under wartime bombardment; the present-day city, etc.—and mix with real space and time to pose the city as an existential concept as well as physical place. As if speaking for cities, one of the film's characters, a young trapeze artist, concludes, "I have a story and I'll go on having one."

Viewing exercise: Assume the characters of the angel, the trapeze artist, and the elderly man in *Wings of Desire* and describe each one's relation to Berlin.

Lesson: The city is both a physical and emotional construct.



The Power of Narrative

As shown by these examples, films shot in urban locations are valuable to the teaching of urban design. For students, they provide an international survey of cities that enables both comparison and contrast of urban form and social life and identification of continuities across the globe. They depict cities from the metropolitan to the building scales, clarifying the relationships among the constituent parts of urbanism. And, with their cameras' depth of field, they capture the city's multiple streams of activity, the forms and spaces containing them, and their hierarchy—all of which are subject to urban design.

Also, to paraphrase the trapeze artist in *Wings of Desire*, films render the city as a story. That story consists of people claiming, occupying and mapping urban form and space. In return, urban complexity enables people to construct highly personalized relationships with their environment that foster intimacy, social exchange, introspection and conflict. All these things make the city alternately dramatic, comedic, romantic and tragic. In cities, where exterior and interior, public and private, may be separated by little more than a wall or window, minor variations in form, down to the curb, sidewalk or step, can exert powerful influences on people's behavior, providing a rich vein for exploration in

urban design—a lesson clearly expressed in films.

Finally, for students of urban design, films suggest the importance of narrative in developing projects. As urban-location films make use of the city's plentiful and often subtle forms and spaces, designers may use narrative to help evolve urban environments. In particular, film may urge them to ask the all-important question: Is this design complex, rich and subtle enough to support multiple narratives constructed by me, by others, and by time?

Notes

1. For example, see commentary by Alain Silver and James Ursini for *Panic in the Streets*, DVD, Fox Film Noir Series, 2006.
2. Usually more than half of Michigan's urban design students come from outside the United States.
3. Thus, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, despite its verisimilitude to New York's Greenwich Village, is not screened because it was filmed entirely on a Hollywood sound stage. Meanwhile, Carrol Reed's *Third Man*, mixing some English studio footage with a preponderance of film shot in Vienna, is shown.