Discipline and Punish in the City? One of the more influential books in the humanities and the social sciences is Michel Foucault (1975), *Discipline and Punish*. London: Penguin. One day, walking south across the Granville Street Bridge, I encountered graffiti that seemed to say that the city itself would discipline and punish anyone who tried to cross the busy street at that point. Vancouver, March 2006 (Elvin Wyly).

Disciplinary Perspectives on Cities
Urban Studies 200, *Cities*
September 13, 2012
Elvin Wyly

Urban studies is an interdisciplinary area of study. Many of the most exciting areas of study today, in fact, are to be found in those parts of colleges and universities that call themselves interdisciplinary. It's worth considering, therefore, what interdisciplinarity means, and how this influences what we can learn about cities.

One way to begin this exploration is to consider the ways that writers sometimes poke fun at particular fields of study. Here's a small sample:

> "To customs and beliefs, the very ones we hold sacred, sociology ruthlessly attaches the adjective 'arbitrary.'"

"In a way, all sociologists are akin to Marxists because of their inclination to settle everyone's accounts but their own." Raymond Claude Ferdinand (1905-1983).

"In a world where for pedagogic and other purposes a very large number of economists is required, an arrangement which discourages many of them from rendering public advice would seem to be well conceived." John Kenneth Galbraith (1908-2006).

"If all the economists in the world were laid end to end, they would not reach a conclusion." George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)

To make an urban planner: "Take a physical planner, a sociologist, an economist; beat the mixture until it blends; pour and spread." William Alonso (1933-1999)

"Physics was the first of the natural sciences to become fully modern and highly mathematical. Chemistry followed in the wake of physics, but biology, the retarded child, lagged far behind." Michael Crichton (1942-), in *The Andromeda Strain* (1969). [1]

Fragments of Knowledge

The urban world is a confusing jumble of infinite complexity, unlimited information, and often contradictory messages. Every city is complex, and there are many thousands of cities, large and small, in very different societies across the world. Making sense of cities therefore requires that we use some kind of 'filter' for all this raw information. We have to choose a small number of things -- objects, processes, ideas -- to study very carefully in a large number of cities. Or we can study a larger number of processes or ideas if we choose just a few cities, or even one city, or perhaps just a single neighbourhood in a city. These choices are difficult, but they are inescapable: it's easy to say that everything is important, and that we should incorporate all the information we have. But the human life span is limited. If we try to include everything, we'll drown in a flood of information, some of it useful, some of it misleading, and some of it simply irrelevant. If we don't have a set of guidelines for what we emphasize and what we ignore, then the choice will be made by chance -- by the random probabilities that determine which bits of information we're able to absorb before we reach the limits of the human attention span. In other words, refusing to make hard choices is still a choice, with real consequences for what we can understand.

For about two centuries, the traditional way of making these choices was guided by the emergence and growth of formal academic *disciplines* in the modern university. The lines were drawn in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in various parts of Europe. In general, disciplinary boundaries separated the physical and life sciences, on the one hand, from the arts and humanities, on the other. Disciplines seemed to provide the logical way of organizing

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[1] Alonso quote from William Alonso (1971). "Beyond the Inter-Disciplinary Approach to Planning." *American Institute of Planners Journal* 37, 169-173, quote on p. 169. All other quotes as cited in Una McGovern, ed. (2005). *Webster's New World Dictionary of Quotations*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Quotes from pages 34, 245, 343, 781.

knowledge, and of setting up the new and larger systems for formal education that were emerging alongside the development of the nation-state, and then with the growth of industrial society.

Formal boundaries between disciplines emerged about two hundred years ago in Europe, in the context of systems of formal education, the rise of the nation-state, and the growth of industrial society.

Since the 1960s, however, disciplinary boundaries have been questioned and contested. And of course as long as there have been clear disciplinary identities, there have been opportunities to stereotype and poke fun at those who specialize along one path or another: regardless of which field you're studying, you probably laughed at least a little bit when reading the discipline jokes above.

For traditional disciplines like sociology, economics, geography, and anthropology, the questioning of disciplinary boundaries has often exposed generational differences -- an "old guard" of traditionalists, versus a new generation wishing to explore things that cross the old boundaries. Urban studies, by contrast, emerged *precisely at the time when traditional disciplinary boundaries were being blurred, re-drawn, crossed, and contested.* As a result, it is widely accepted in urban studies that to really understand cities, we have to approach urban questions from more than one perspective. We must weave together distinctive insights, methods, and assumptions from specialists in different disciplines and traditions.[2] Urban studies is "often viewed as either a multidisciplinary or an interdisciplinary field,"[3] with "rather ill-defined boundaries,"[4] and the best way to introduce an urban studies textbook is to present it as something that "draws together insights, theories, and statistics from a wide variety of related disciplines, among them history, archaeology, psychology, geography, economics, and political science."[5]

The field of urban studies emerged precisely at the time when the boundaries between traditional disciplines were being questioned, blurred, and contested.

Traditional disciplines are clearly out of fashion in today's academy. [Insert your preferred prefix here]-disciplinary inquiry is hot. Why? To begin with, words like "interdisciplinary" and "multidisciplinary" each have four more syllables than the old tired, worn-out "discipline." Most

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[2] "One way to reduce the blind spots" that we all have about cities and urban life "is to look at urban life from many perspectives and then to combine insights. Alas, this is easier said than done." E. Barbara Phillips (1996). *City Lights: Urban-Suburban Life in the Global Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 32.

[3] Phillips, *City Lights*, p. 33.

[4] Phillips, *City Lights*, p. 33.

[5] John J. Macionis and Vincent N. Parrillo (2007). *Cities and Urban Life*, Fourth Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice-Hall, p. 3.

academics are middle-class, and as the literary critic Paul Fussell once wrote, adding syllables is akin to "the middle-class trick of dressing up to go shopping," and so we know that these new terms would score quite well on Hugh Rawson's "Fog Or Pomposity" index (FOP) that captures the essence of middle-class language.[6] But in all seriousness, the widespread move to break down traditional disciplinary boundaries is driven by very important considerations.

First, most significant questions simply cannot be answered properly within the boundaries of a single field. Most interesting things are simply too complex and multilayered to make sense without perspectives from different areas of specialization.

Second, and closely related to the issue of complexity, new social, cultural, and technological trends introduce new areas of study that simply do not fit neatly into existing categories -- today, we might think of film and media studies, genetic ethics, Internet and society studies, and so on. But only little more than a century ago, rapid industrialization and urbanization were driving massive societal changes in Europe and North America at precisely the time when the field of sociology was emerging to address new questions about individual and group relations. Macionis and Parrillo therefore suggest that the field's view of cities was distorted by the social, cultural, and technological trend of the time -- industrialization.[7]

Interdisciplinary fields are growing because 1) many important questions cannot be understood solely through established disciplines, 2) new things emerge that defy old categories and definitions, and 3) most disciplines have relatively short histories.

Third, the current move 'beyond disciplines' reflects a growing recognition of their short history. Most ideas of disciplinary structure go back to Immanuel Kant's description in 1798:

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[6] "...most euphemisms permit the speaker to multiply syllables, and the middle class confuses sheer numerousness with weight and value. Jonathan Swift amused himself by imagining spoken syllables as physical entities with 'weight,' density, specific gravity, and other purely physical attributes. The contemporary middle class acts as if embracing Swift's conception but without a trace of his irony." Paul Fussell (1983). *Class.* New York: Ballantine Books, p. 187. Fussell cites Hugh Rawson's *Dictionary of Euphemisms and Other Doubletalk*; "Rawson goes on to develop a nice pseudo-social scientific "Fog Or Pomposity Index," by which a euphemism's relation to the word or phrase it replaces can be quantified, high numbers indicating the greatest multiplication of syllables, or euphemistic success. Rawson's arithmetic details need not concern us. We can just note that ... one of the highest FOP indexes Rawson notes is earned by the designation Personal Assistant to the Secretary (Special Activities), given to his cook by a former Cabinet member. This euphemism registers an FOP number of 17.8, which must be close to an all-time record." Fussell, *Class*, p. 187.

[7] "Many early sociologists shared a pessimistic vision of the city," but "In the light of contemporary research, the city emerges as a more neutral phenomenon. ... the horrors of nineteenth-century London appear to be primarily a product of the massive industrialization that took place within a capitalist society, and not a result of something inherently urban." Macionis and Parrillo, *Cities,* p. 7.

"It was not a bad idea, whoever first conceived and proposed a public means for treating the sum of knowledge ... in a quasi industrial manner, with a division of labour where, for so many fields as there may be of knowledge, so many public teachers would be allotted, professors being trustees, forming together a kind of common scientific entity, called a university (or high school) and having autonomy (for only scholars can pass judgment on scholars as such); and, thanks to its faculties (various small societies where university teachers are ranged, in keeping with the variety of the main branches of knowledge), the university would be authorised to admit, on the one hand, student-apprentices from the lower schools aspiring to its level, and to grant, on the other hand -- after prior examination, and on its own authority -- to teachers who are 'free' (not drawn from the members themselves) and called 'Doctors,' a universally recognized rank (conferring upon them a degree) -- in short, *creating* them."[8]

A small sample of the many new areas of study that don't fit within traditional disciplinary boundaries

Economic sociology
Genetic engineering
Medical ethics
Bioinformatics
Computational biology
Neuroscience + economics = neoroeconomics
Digital humanities
Computational social sciences
Internet and society studies
Semiotic marketing
Biogeographical science

Or if we clean up the Kantian run-on sentences and view the situation from today's perspective, "For only two centuries, knowledge has assumed a disciplinary form; for less than one, it has been produced in academic institutions by professionally trained knowers. Yet we have come to see these circumstances as so natural that we tend to forget their historical novelty and fail to imagine how else we might produce and organize knowledge."[9]

In 1798, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant described the university as "treating the sum of knowledge ... in a quasi industrial manner, with a division of labour" amongst different fields of study.

But if there is a growing interest in moving beyond disciplines, that doesn't make it easy.

It's quite a challenge. Unfortunately, "the expansion and specialization of knowledge in our high-tech society make it difficult for anyone to study systematically the many facets of any complex phenomenon, including the city."[10] Three considerations are critical.

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[8] Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 1979 edition (original 1798); cited in Michael Peters (1999). "Introduction: Disciplinarity and the Emergence of Cultural Studies." In Peters, ed., *After the Disciplines*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1-35, quote on pp. 18-19.

[9] Ellen Messer-Davidow, David R. Shumway, and David J. Sylvan, eds. (1993), *Knowledges*, p. viii; cited in Peters, "Introduction," p. 1.

[10] Phillips, *City Lights*, p. 32.

First, all fields of knowledge have been struggling with the tension between fragmentation and integration: the intellectual history of the late nineteenth century, and the entire twentieth century, is a story in which the expansion of scholarship almost always involved its specialization, fragmentation, and compartmentalization -- even as leading scholars lamented the loss of holistic, synthetic thinking. Scholars "risk knowing more and more about less and less,"[11] and so each generation brings a fresh effort to erase (some) disciplinary boundaries and forge new paths toward synthesis.[12]

*The dilemma of specialization: specialization is required to gain expertise on complex things ... but scholars risk knowing **more and more** about **less and less.***

All fields of knowledge are struggling with the tension between fragmentation and integration.

The expansion of new frontiers of knowledge sometimes requires forgetting old knowledge.

Disciplines have different rules for advancing knowledge.

Second, the expansion of new knowledge, set within the context of the constraints of time -- among students and professors in the academy, and people working in various capacities in all walks of life in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors -- often requires the burial or forgetting of old knowledge. Many if not most of the decisions on the destruction of old knowledge, particularly holistic, integrative works, are unintentional.[13]

Third, the criteria by which knowledge is evaluated, prioritized, and received varies widely across disciplines. In some fields the curriculum is clearly structured, and it's fairly easy for the experts to understand where they are on the research frontier. In other fields -- vast areas of the humanities

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[11] Phillips, *City Lights*, p. 32.

[12] One of the most prominent recent changes involves a major restructuring of the core curriculum at Harvard University, an institution whose decisions are followed closely by many other colleges and universities. "...the Faculty of Arts and Sciences has embarked on the first broad review of the undergraduate experience at Harvard in a quarter century. The core curriculum has been an enormous success but I think it's a safe statement about organizations that there is no innovation so good that it should not be reviewed in a comprehensive way every quarter century," especially when that quarter-century produces genuinely new fields such as computational biology, bioinformatics, internet and society studies, and so on. Lawrence H. Summers (2003). "Remarks at Harvard Administrators Forum." Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, February 20. Available at http://www.president.harvard.edu/speeches/2003/administrators.html

[13] As one example in the field of urban studies, Michael Dear and Steven Flusty, who have offered a "Los Angeles" school of urbanism as an invocation of "postmodern urbanism," have been criticized for ignoring or forgetting the multi-faceted, inter-disciplinary, and mixed-method approaches of the Chicago School of Sociology. For a forceful (yet playful) critique, see Robert A. Beauregard (1999), "Break Dancing on Santa Monica Boulevard." *Urban Geography* 20(5), 396-399.

and social sciences, as well as genuinely new fields of inquiry -- there are fundamental ambiguities not simply on the answers to important questions, but the validity of the questions themselves and their relation to other realms of knowledge.

Noun or Verb?

The field of urban studies is shaped by these considerations: the field is not normally considered a formal discipline, and is situated in wildly different contexts at different institutions -- often making it difficult to define the enterprise with any degree of precision. Yet this is precisely what gives urban studies its health, vitality, and dynamism, as members of an "invisible college" with shared interests work to broaden understanding of many kinds of urban processes. Aspiring to an unambiguous, well-defined identity (a *discipline* in the Kantian sense, one of "the main branches of knowledge") risks creating all the mechanisms and practices that would be required to police the borders (to *discipline*). Think about what this would mean. One of the most influential definitions of disciplinarity goes like this:

> "1. Disciplines 'specify the objects we can study (genes, deviant persons, classic texts) and the relations that obtain among them (mutation, criminality, canonicity). They provide criteria for our knowledge (truth, significance, impact) and methods (quantification, interpretation, analysis) that regulate our access to it';
>
> 2. '...disciplines produce practitioners, orthodox and heterodox, specialist and generalist, theoretical and experimental';
>
> 3. 'disciplines produce economies of values. They manufacture discourse ....They provide jobs .... They secure funding .... They generate prestige ....';
>
> 4. 'disciplines produce the idea of progress. They proliferate objects to study and improve explanations. They devise notions that command ever-growing assent....';"[14]

Urban studies just does not have the organization, power, or resources to perform all these functions (see the latter pages of our 'Introduction' last week). Urban studies certainly can be defined to 'specify the objects' we study and some of their relations, but that's about it.

Find the Center, Avoid the Edge

So there is consensus on one point: urban studies doesn't fit into the traditional disciplinary box. As Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson put it in their essay, "Retext(ur)ing the city,"

> "It is now some time since we entered the age of multi-disciplinarity. Boundaries between disciplines have become more and more blurred.... The city is one area

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[14] Ellen Messer-Davidow, David R. Shumway, and David J. Sylvan, eds. (1993), *Knowledges*, p. viii; cited in Peters, "Introduction," p. 10.

which has benefited from this multi-disciplinary ... thinking, though the connections are still sometimes tenuous....”[15]

But we must be very careful here. Many folks come into certain fields (not just urban studies) and say things such as, “I really like this area of study. It's so interdisciplinary!” Often that's not really what they mean. What they are actually thinking is something like this: “I came from a field where I felt so trapped, where we had to ask questions in a certain way, and now I feel like I have more flexibility.” Or they mean, “Those people were too strict, and you seem more friendly and easygoing.” Or, “I really don't know how to define this field, but it looks like fun.” Freedom, flexibility, friendliness, and fun are very important. But they are not equivalent to multidisciplinarity or interdisciplinarity.[16][17] Don't spend time on the edges defining a field by what it's not. Go right to the center, find out precisely what interests you, and state it in bold, confident terms. Maybe you'll find your passion right at the heart of a powerful, clearly-defined discipline; or perhaps you'll find it in the dynamic and confusing – but always exciting – border zones between the old traditionally-defined disciplines.

Interdisciplinary urban studies means that 1) there are stark contrasts in questions, methods, and styles, 2) there are many "traveling theories," and 3) what the field lacks in the power of an established discipline, it makes up for in an openness to new ways of thinking.

Just a few of the many urban issues that require multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches:

Transportation planning (engineering, planning, economics)
Metropolitan governance (political science, economics, law)
Urban poverty (sociology, economics, political science, psychology)
Urban sustainability (ecology, engineering, geography)
Historic preservation (architecture, planning, engineering, geography)

Multidisciplinarity is the use of several specialized fields of knowledge to provide insight on a particular topic, question, or problem.

Interdisciplinarity is the fusion of specialized fields of knowledge in order to define new kinds of topics, explore new types of questions, and identify and tackle distinctive sets of problems. If we explore how specialists in economics, sociology, history, and political science approach a particular issue (such as the emergence and persistence of

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[15] Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (2002). “Retext(ur)ing the City.” *City* 5(3), 350-362, quote from p. 350.

[16] Although I will concede that freedom, fun, and flexibility are much better on the FOP index, and if it were up to me I would use them to replace most appearances of the more cumbersome “multidisciplinarity” and “interdisciplinarity.”

[17] It is also the case that the same things that make some people feel “trapped” or constrained in certain areas of study will be welcome as “guidance” to others. Interdisciplinarity is not for everyone, just as the formal strictures of a traditionally-defined field of study are not for everyone.

concentrated urban poverty, in 'slums') that's a multi-disciplinary act; inter-disciplinary efforts involve building new areas of study, like behavioral economics, economic sociology, bioinformatics, genetic ethics, legal geographies, and so on.

And so we should be prepared to engage with an often confusing but rich outpouring of different kinds of insights from outlets such as *The Journal of Urban Affairs*, *Urban Affairs Review*, *City*, *Urban Studies*, and the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. The energy and vitality of the field comes from its engagement with varied and sometimes contradictory influences from different disciplines. Consider three examples.

1. There are stark contrasts in the questions, methods, answers, and styles of presentation used to approach the same phenomenon. The emergence and persistence of concentrated poverty, for instance, is conceptualized, measured, and explained in different ways by economists, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, and others. People working in (or from) these different traditions often have distinct ways of framing issues; different assumptions about how the world works; differences in the unit of observation or the scale of analysis; and different 'tools of the trade' to provide insight.

2. "Traveling" theories are quite common. A 'traveling' theory is an easily-understood concept that is torn out of geographical or disciplinary context and gets a wide audience in other fields. The optimistic view of traveling theory is that good ideas travel fast. The pessimistic view is: so do viruses, rumours, and other dangerous things. And it's all too easy to borrow a word or phrase without fully understanding its origins, its deeper meaning, or (to ratchet up the FOP index) theoretically significant implications. Sometimes, controversial theories will get debated amongst specialists in one field, and then before you know it, people in other fields are using the theory without any recognition of the disagreement. On the other hand, the fluid and porous boundaries in urban studies make it possible for scholars to question and challenge problematic traveling theories. Some of the traveling theories that are circulating in urban studies these days include broken windows, the culture of poverty, social capital, and sustainability.

3. Urban studies may lack the confidence, focus, specialization, and power of more established fields; but this position encourages humility, and helps to foster open conversation instead of the imposition of Unquestioned Absolute Truth. Phillips puts it like this: "...the notion of an objective, value-free social science is a mythical ideal, not a practical possibility. Worse, it often serves as a cover, turning a professional, upper-middle-class view of what's real into the official definition of reality. This can be especially dangerous when urbanists advise policymakers. Projecting what they think is objectively good for other people (especially people who don't share the same dreams, material possessions, or values), urbanists have often imposed their values on others in the name of objectivity."[18] I concur, with a friendly amendment: most of these impositions happen only when urbanists have a) strong, clearly-defined disciplinary assumptions and criteria for truth, b) power and money, and c) an audience with a powerful policymaker at the right time. It was rare to see this combination in interdisciplinary urban studies when Phillips wrote those words. A decade later, it's even more unusual. Perhaps we should be thankful.

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[18] Phillips, *City Lights*, p. 50.

The Interdisciplinary Urban in Action. Often, the best insights come from crossing boundaries. Often this means getting outside the walls of the classroom or the corporate workplace, and into the streets. Above, a Citywide Housing Coalition protest over affordable housing commitments at Millennium Water, Vancouver's Olympic Village; May, 2010 (Elvin Wyly) Other times, it means going from one side of the university to the other side -- going to talks on wide-ranging issues that attract people from many different disciplines. Below, John Friedmann, Sage Bistro at UBC, August 22, 2007 (Elvin Wyly). John Friedmann is one of the most famous urban planners in the world -- but he's a scholar whose interests are wide-ranging and difficult to fit into a neat box labeled "urban planning." Friedmann's talk was "Place Making in the City: A Colloquium," presented here at UBC at an event co-sponsored by the Urban Studies Program and the Department of Sociology, as part of the Conference on Urban Justice and Sustainability under the auspices of the International Sociological Association Research Committee on Urban and Regional Development (Research Committee 21). Wow, that's a mouthful of a description, isn't it? The proliferation of long institutional titles and topic descriptions is yet another indicator of the increasingly complex -- and yet delightfully fascinating -- terrain of urban inquiry. A few tidbits from Friedmann's talk: Dolores Hayden is correct to note that "place" is one of the trickiest words in the English language, but "all of us are inherently place-makers, in how we appropriate the blank spaces of our habitat, what Harvey calls absolute material spaces." The city itself can be called "a place of places." Places can be, and often are, "strategic sites for social transformation."

Delightful Disarray?

The ambiguous boundaries of urban studies, then, constitute its signal weakness and its most important strength. Near the end of an introduction to a series of essays in a lovely collection called *The Urban Moment*, Sophie Body-Gendrot and Robert A. Beauregard write: "To end by stating that urban theory today is in delightful disarray would be to imply more disagreement than actually exists. Large consensual patches abut vast areas of uncertainty, with the usual defenders of debunked perspectives and eccentric formulations scattered about the fringes. Urban theorists, despite Boris Pasternak's claim that 'gregariousness is always the refuge of mediocrities' ... are disinclined to seek the splendor of intellectual isolation."[19]

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[19] Sophie Body-Gendrot and Robert A. Beauregard (1999), "Imagined Cities, Engaged Citizens." In Robert A. Beauregard and Sophie Body-Gendrot, editors, *The Urban Moment: Cosmopolitan Essays on the Late-20th Century City*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 3-22, quote from p. 18.