

AMST 100
Exploring American Culture
Roger Williams University
11:00 - 12:30 T, Th
CAS 228
Fall Semester, 2006

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Hours: T, Th: 9:30 -11:00
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Course Introduction

AMST100: The American Experience

An introduction to American Cultural Studies. Considers the impact of culture upon individuals in relation to their present, past, and future. Particular emphasis on the family as cultural agent

Roger Williams University Catalogue

Book List

Stilgoe, John R.

Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820 - 1939
New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988

Jackson, Kenneth T.

Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States
NY: Oxford University Press, 1984

Rybczynski, Witold:

Home : A Short History of an Idea
New York, N.Y., U.S.A. : Viking, 1986

Kidder, Tracy:

House
Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1985

A Few Introductory Remarks

I've printed the catalogue description for AMST100, just in case you've not read it, or have forgotten what it promises. The general statement is an accurate description of what I'm going to try to accomplish with you in this course. The last sentence fragment, particular emphasis... needs to be qualified somewhat. The particular emphasis in this particular version of The American Experience is going to be upon a cultural artifact which is produced by the family and which shapes the family as well, the house. The house (actually house and home--a closely related idea) is the stage on which the family drama is enacted. We know that practically no condition is more tragic, and indeed scary than homelessness is. Leaving one home and forming another is one of the rites of passage for us.

Cultures express beliefs and customs in the shelters they create. Simply put, as people travel, they observe differences in the ways that shelters (houses) and groups of shelters and other structures (cities, towns, villages) look. These differences are not random or matter of chance. They result from choices people make based on who they are, what they believe about the world, and the forces to which their cultural history has subjected them.

Because these differences are not random, people like ourselves can think about them rationally--and explain them. We can observe them with intelligence and sophistication, rather than bias and ignorance. We can see that our taste is just as much a product of our experience as others' tastes are products of theirs. How much this will increase our "freedom of informed choice and judgement" is open to debate. Our own cultures are not that easy to escape.

Probably more important is that looking at the cultural creations of other people helps us to do the hardest things of all--think rationally about the creations of our own cultures. Thinkers have long known that it is far easier to think clearly from a distance. The things with which we are involved as a matter of daily routine are so familiar to us that we rarely think about them at all. We just accept them the way they are, and use them as they have been handed down to us. This is probably true about houses, even though they represent for most people their most significant capital resource investment. Why this culture places such an emphasis on home-ownership is worthy of consideration, as well.

Course Materials:

There is a LOT of reading for this course. None of it is difficult or technical, but it is going to require a significant time commitment on your part. Note that this section of American Studies 100 is not the same as the other section. Be careful that you purchase the books for this section and not those for the other. It may be a good idea for you to look the materials for all sections over, just in case you find that your interests really suggest you belong elsewhere.

Stilgoe, John R.

Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820 - 1939

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988

I think every American knows what a "suburb" is. A significant number of you, perhaps the majority, most likely live in a suburb now, or have lived in a suburban area at some time in the past. Stilgoe, is interested in the form or pattern humans impose on a place. He understands that suburbs have a visual signature, and that the look of the suburb is a quite deliberate thing – a matter of symbol and icon representing an ideal of living to which suburbanites aspire, either consciously or unconsciously. The illustrations are very important here.

Jackson, Kenneth T.

Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States

NY: Oxford University Press, 1984

Jackson is an urban historian and cultural geographer, and his book will make a nice complement to Stilgoe's. There will be more about the mechanics of suburban living and technological innovations which make the suburban lifestyle a real option for growing numbers of Americans. We'll see, too, how the suburb moves conceptually from a less desirable environment (a sub - urb) to the object of aspiration it has become

Rybczynski, Witold:

Home : a Short History of an Idea

New York, N.Y., U.S.A. : Viking, 1986

I'm hoping that this book will prove to be a real "eye-opener." Most of us think that a common word like "home" represents a fixed thing. We're going to discover how subtle and changing our understanding of "home" has been. Our method of work at this time will be historical, and we'll look to see how what we value in a house has been assembled across time, drawing on the experiences brought to this country from a wide variety of largely European cultures.

Kidder, Tracy:

House

Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1985

If you are at all familiar with Tracy Kidder's work, you'll recognize that his particular talent is the ability to write a factual analysis of something without spoiling the story. People Magazine called this book "Powerful, rich, enjoyable...a suspenseful, gripping tale!" The subject of the book is the building of a house. It is a tribute to the author that such an "ordinary" and commonplace happening could be presented in such a way. **THIS IS NOT A NOVEL.** The people, houses, and events are real.

Course Work

- I've taken an advanced look at my roster for this course and it pleased me to notice a number of familiar names. Welcome back, and I'm glad you wanted to have another experience with me. Those of you to whom this applies know one thing already, and that is that I have been moving more and more towards a course with a significant internet component to it. From my early days at Roger Williams I've provided a course overview at the beginning and then a series of weekly assignment sheets throughout the course, and that practice still obtains here. Beginning five years ago, I started creating websites for my classes, and that practice continues now. In fact, I intend not to pass out any paper to you, once the first two weeks of the course have passed. If things work out as I hope, I will be introducing this course to you via the web, then passing these sheets of paper out following that introduction. After I end the practice of passing out syllabi, you will be responsible for visiting the class website at least weekly and keeping current with the work ahead. If you want to have a printed copy of the course work, you can print one off on your own. There will be a "printer friendly" version available at the website. You find it by clicking the header bar at the top of each page.
- You will also note that I have a special [e-mailbox](#) for this class. The address appears on the header of this handout, and on every page in the class website, as well. I encourage you to e-mail me when you have a question or comment, and you'll get a speedy reply.
- All written work for this course, except the bibliography project described below, must be turned in using the [blackboard electronic drop box](#). You may submit using any of these word processing programs: Microsoft Word, Microsoft Works, or Corel Word Perfect. If you are unfamiliar with the Blackboard System you can find help at the computer labs on the second floor of the Gabelli School of Business.

The major portion of your written work will be done outside of class.

There Will Be a Take-home Final, Rather than an In-class Final for this Course.

- There will also be a midterm-exam, but it will not be in traditional form. It will involve your reflections on thoughts about cities and suburbs as you encounter them in Stilgoe, and Jackson. I will frame the questions and post them to the class website in approximately two to three weeks, well before you get very far into the class reading assignments. That way, you'll be able to prepare for this exam as you prepare for the classes themselves.
- Part of the take-home final will require an analysis of Tracy Kidder's book, *House*. Though factual, it reads like a good novel, and I hate to spoil the story and your encounter with the characters in it by analyzing it to death. I would prefer for you to read it on your own, and aim to have it finished by the beginning of November. I'll ask you how you're getting along by the middle of October, and if necessary, I'll apply a few touches of the lash. (That's academic-speak for a snap quiz).
- The final exam will also require you to analyze one of the houses in which you've lived: the one you think of first when you hear the word "home". More about that, later.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

I'd like you all to get a start on an ongoing semester-long project which we'll be doing. American Studies differentiates itself from American History partly on the basis of subject matter and partly on the basis of resources. American Studies tends to look farther afield for insights into the culture and its character, using a range of literary sources, artifacts, music, art, and popular culture of all sorts. By the end of the semester, each of you will be preparing an informal annotated bibliography on the topic Houses and Homes in American Culture. This will include at least:

- 1. One Novel
- 2. One Short Story
- 3. One Poem
- 4. One Essay
- 5. One Newspaper or Journal article
- 6. One Painting (high style)
- 7. One popular illustration
- 8. One piece of popular music
- 9. One Movie, Play, or Television Program
- 10. Other..... Something else, of your own choice or devising,

...in which **American** houses or homes are the focus.

- Illustrations or examples from our texts are not eligible.
- By American, I mean residences within the geographic United States. We will be talking about European houses, but don't include European examples in your bibliography.
- I want you to find these largely using the Internet. It is good for you to get as much research practice as possible. You can, of course use other sources as well. However, you will quickly learn that the Internet is a very good way to access even local news stories.

The annotation for each one will include:

- 1. How you located the item. If you found it on the internet, include the website address and the search engine you used to find it.
- 2. A very short abstract (2-3 sentences) of the content.
- 3. A paragraph or two explaining what a consideration of this particular item added to your understanding of the role of houses and homes in American culture.

I want you to get to know each other and to feel comfortable collaborating with each other and with learning from each other. To that end, I encourage you to use the class roster on the Blackboard website, and to feel free to e-mail each other. If I decide to use some small group exercises, I'll set these up on Blackboard, as well.

Grading and Grade Weights

I want to direct your attention away from the written work as a mechanism for assigning grades and towards a process for augmenting what you learn. But I know students can't help but be concerned about grades and all the associated concerns, such as how much "a" counts, as opposed to "b". So here's the breakdown:

The Midterm (30%) will have two distinct parts.

- Each will count approximately 15% of your grade and will be graded independently. I may, in fact, decide to distribute each section of the mid-term independently depending on how things go and whether or not we have disruptions.

The Take-Home Final (40%) will also have two parts, each graded independently.

- Each will count approximately 20% of your final grade. The Final will be due at the scheduled time for the final examination. I will publish the questions for the take-home final about the middle of November.

The Annotated Bibliography will be due the last class session of the semester.

- I'm setting this due date because I'd like to have you show your work to each other. It will account for 15% of your final grade.

Tallying the above leads to a total of 85%. The remaining fifteen per cent will be accounted for by quizzes (if any) participation, attendance, and the like.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Life happens to all of us, and I try to be as liberal as I can regarding excusing absences from class for illnesses, events scheduled by other classes or the athletic department, and emergencies. I expect to be notified by e-mail in advance when you are going to be absent, unless the nature of the reason (for example, an accident on the way to class) makes this impossible. Use the [Class E-mail](#) for this. More than four unexcused absences will have a negative impact on your grade.. Regardless of this liberal policy, attendance is expected. Perfect attendance may give you a gold star, but it won't raise your grade.

I will pass around an attendance sign in sheet. . It is your responsibility to make sure that your name is on the roster before the end of the class period.

Undergraduate Pledge to Academic Integrity

We, the undergraduate students of Roger Williams University, commit ourselves to academic integrity. We promise to pursue the highest ideals of academic life, to challenge ourselves with the most rigorous standards, to be honest in any academic endeavor, to conduct ourselves responsibly and honorably, and to assist one another as we live and work together in mutual support.

For a number of years now, this pledge has been the centerpiece of the convocation which begins the fall term. It is worthwhile taking a minute or two to reflect on what it says. The twin supports of Academic Life are collaboration and independence of thought. In this class, there is no curve. In the largest sense, you're not in competition with each other, and to the degree that you can assist each other in learning you'll win nothing but praise from me. Yet it is equally important that each student exercise his/her own independent judgment, and have confidence in his/her own mind. Plagiarism defeats the whole purpose of the enterprise, and the University will not tolerate this particular form of intellectual theft. For the university statement on plagiarism, and for a general exposition of its Academic Standards, [consult the online catalogue](#).