

# ED460213 2001-12-00 Making a Community Interesting to Itself: Providing a Social Education through Urban History and Neighborhood Studies. ERIC Digest.

ERIC Development Team

[www.eric.ed.gov](http://www.eric.ed.gov)

---

## Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

<a href="#">Making a Community Interesting to Itself: Providing a Social Education through Urban History and Neighborhood Studies. ERIC Digest....</a>	2
<a href="#">THE VALUE OF STUDYING CITIES.....</a>	2
<a href="#">SOURCE MATERIALS FOR TEACHING URBAN STUDIES.....</a>	3
<a href="#">EXPLORING THE CITYSCAPE.....</a>	4
<a href="#">REFERENCES.....</a>	5



---

**ERIC Identifier:** ED460213

**Publication Date:** 2001-12-00

**Author:** Danzer, Gerald A.

**Source:** ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education New York NY.

Making a Community Interesting to Itself:  
Providing a Social Education through Urban  
History and Neighborhood Studies. ERIC

# Digest.

THIS DIGEST WAS CREATED BY ERIC, THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ERIC, CONTACT ACCESS ERIC 1-800-LET-ERIC

The formal study of cities in American schools is a thing of the past. Urban studies courses, often accompanied by field experiences, have largely disappeared from the curriculum, especially in secondary schools. But, as is often the case with good ideas from the past, community studies and an urban focus are returning to the social studies. This digest reviews urban studies from a historical perspective. Then it offers some suggestions for educators anxious to reconsider the basic idea: using the story of the city, especially its neighborhoods and suburbs, as the basis for sustained investigation in social studies classes. In the process the city itself becomes a document, a primary source that students read as a text.

## THE VALUE OF STUDYING CITIES

We live in the age of cities. It is estimated that in 2050 six billion of Earth's nine billion people will live in metropolitan areas. For students, the best avenue to an urban awareness is the study of a particular city, usually the one nearby. And, to really know a city, a student must experience it firsthand. Book learning or virtual reality will not suffice, especially when we reflect on the deeper significance of education and ask a century-old question: How can we make a community interesting to itself? The query is one that the sculptor Lorado Taft raised dozens of times in the early twentieth century. It is also an important question for educators who know that engaging the interest of their students is a prerequisite for effective teaching.

When framing an answer, we must keep in mind that the true test of a social studies education is what students do with their knowledge throughout their lives. In the decades of acute urban crisis in the United States, especially the 1960s and 1970s, scholars and educators paid a lot of attention to helping students connect with urban settings. Schools were to be a part of the battle to save America's cities and to build strong local communities everywhere in the nation. Then a series of forces changed the direction of American education. The back-to-basics movement, with its increasing public insistence on academic standards, often narrowly focused on factual knowledge or academic skills; and the increasing detachment of schools from their communities, with the eclipse of the neighborhood school, turned the social studies toward reliance on basic textbooks. Field trips and study outside the school walls became less frequent in the 1980s and 1990s. Courses in urban studies, local history, and the built environment faded away, but never completely disappeared. Now, in the new century, old questions are being asked once again. How can we make a community interesting to itself? In which ways can schools best help their students prepare for a lifetime of learning? Why are cities so appealing? How should schools connect to their communities?

The core of the issue is that, in 2001, cities are back. It is now fashionable to live downtown and to have roots in old neighborhoods. Even the new suburbs, founded in the 1960s and 1970s, are realizing that they have a history, distinctive elements worthy of preservation. The aging baby boom generation is discovering that on the old crabgrass frontier a local character has emerged which should be handed on to the next generation. A movement called the New Urbanism has brought a new appreciation for the virtues, social, cultural, and ecological, of the old urban neighborhoods. Schools are beginning to react to the newfound interest in cities, hoping to find curricular space in history and geography courses for in-depth study of the local environment. Indeed, schools are now considering how much time they should devote to the study of local places and community institutions.

## SOURCE MATERIALS FOR TEACHING URBAN STUDIES

\*Basic Texts. With local studies in the schools returning to vogue, a raft of old curriculum materials can still be found in the resource centers of many schools. The last major survey of the field quoted extensively from various projects and key publications. Part one of this helpful volume, *Using History in the Classroom* (Metcalf & Downey, 1982), discusses the methods and sources for doing local history, with an emphasis on material culture. Part two focuses on using local sources to teach the various social studies disciplines: sociology, economics, and political science. Part three gives useful directions on setting up a local history course and provides some excellent examples. The major limitation of the book is its curious neglect of geography. Another volume (Kyvig & Marty, 2000), first issued in the same year by the same publisher, addressed the general public. It has a good deal to say to teachers, especially in the chapter *Linking the Particular and the Universal*. A series of companion books in the *Nearby History* series (Kyvig & Marty, 2000) continue the discussion on specific topics like schools, places of worship, businesses, houses, public places, and local utilities.



### Resources on the Politics of Urban Development

After sampling the methods and sources used in the local studies movement, teachers will want to dip into the rich literature on cities that forms the bedrock on which urban studies curriculum materials are ultimately based. Two classics come immediately to mind. Both appeared in 1961 and have remained in print ever since. They are useful handbooks that insist that teachers and students explore cities in person. The first, by Jane Jacobs, an articulate resident of an old New York City neighborhood, launched a spirited attack on the urban renewal policies put in place at that time. Much of her criticism has since become conventional wisdom. The second book, by Lewis Mumford,

made a similar argument, but used examples from all periods of Western Civilization as a phalanx to advance the critique.



### Resources on Urban Geography and History

Jacobs and Mumford both modeled two fundamental ways of observing the urban environment: looking at its special arrangements and at its constantly changing character. These central concerns of geography and history are the gateways through which most social studies teachers have entered the field of urban studies. A central concern of urban geographers in the past several decades has been how the dynamic between the physical setting and human activity has been expressed in the form and arrangement of cities and towns. Meanwhile, historians have established a periodization schema for the study of urban America, dividing the decades into the walking, streetcar, and automobile cities. Suburbs have yet to receive due attention from both geographers and historians. From the vantage point of 2001, the forces of sub-urbanization have triumphed. Today old neighborhoods and downtown's are developing a suburban look. In some central business districts, even some skyscrapers often have lawns (Hirschhorn, 1990; Kilar, 1977).



### Curriculum Materials

A major curriculum effort sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities in the 1970s and 1980s applied many of the themes from the local studies and the urban studies movements to social education. The Chicago Neighborhood History Project (Danzer & McBride, 1985) eventually produced eight weeklong modules to provide guidance on how to study cities. Each module contained daily lessons that could be mixed and matched. The resulting mosaic curriculum design allowed the suggested lesson plans, source materials, and student activities to be adapted to a variety of educational settings and formats. The guiding light for this approach was that students would be engaged in local research activities such as those featured in History Fair or History Day projects. The daily lessons in the Chicago units provide guidance and examples on themes like How to Read an Old Map or studying The Neighborhood as an Art Form.

## EXPLORING THE CITYSCAPE

In a very real sense, classroom work on the urban experience should be looked upon as preparation for the direct experience of the city itself. An important element in teacher preparation programs and in continuing education experiences is the active exploration of the locality of the school and the metropolitan system of which it is a part. To help

residents and visitors explore any city as a text, the urban affairs journalist for The Louisville Courier-Journal developed a glossary of special concepts that pointed out the nature of cities (Clay, 1980). His word game of fronts, strips, beats, stocks, vantages, and so on remains a delightful way of getting at essential understandings and has had a deep impact on subsequent studies of the cityscape.

Educators often need inspiration to step outside of their assigned boxes, encouragement to take a class on a walk or to transform the teaching enterprise into a series of learning experiences. John R. Stilgoe (1998) provides such support in a recent collection of essays. *Outside Lies Magic* begins with a command: Get out now, not just outside, but beyond the trapE. (p. 1). Most readers will drop the book after a few inspirational pages, hurrying to get outside and gather some of the magic that comes from looking (p. 187). Then they will pause for a rest and be drawn back to the essay, only to be pushed on again, looking at familiar places with new understanding and appreciation.

The magic is this: even the most ordinary community will become interesting to itself if we stop and look with understanding eyes. And the teacher in us all whispers, How can we help our young people catch some of this magic? Bringing community adventures to our students may do wonders for their sense of belonging, of community, of stewardship, and of life itself.

## REFERENCES

Clay, G. (1980). *Close-up, how to read the American city*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Danzer, G.A., & McBride, L.W. (1986). *People, space and time: The Chicago Neighborhood History Project*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Hirschhorn, B. (Ed.). (1990, Fall). Urban history--A special section. *OAH Magazine of History*, 5(2), 21-61. (EJ 425 026-033)

Jacobs, J. (1961). *The death and life of great American cities*. New York: Random House.

Kilar, J.W. (1977). *Urban history in the community college*. (ED 134 279)

Kyvig, D.E., & Marty, M. A. (2000). *Nearby history: Exploring the past around you* (2nd Ed.). Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira. (ED 446 007)

Metcalf, F.D., & Downey, M. T. (1982). *Using local history in the classroom*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History.

Mumford, L. (1961). *The city in history: Its origins, its transformations, and its prospects*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Stilgoe, J.R. (1998). Outside lies magic: Regaining history and awareness in everyday places. New York: Walker and Company.



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Frischknecht, U., & Frischknecht, K. (1972). Urban community trails: Using the community as a learning resource. *Social Studies*, 72(5), 216-224.

Self, E., & Harwood, F. (1975, January-February). Urban problems and urban education: Some thoughts and curriculum ideas. *Social Studies*, 66(1), 7-10. (EJ 110 087)

Stranix, E.L., & Fleishman, M. (n.d.). City street: An outdoor classroom: A student workbook. Philadelphia: Con-Stran Productions. (ED 142 489)

The urban landscape: A multidisciplinary approach. (1993). Storrs: University of Connecticut, Connecticut Academy for English, Geography, and History. (ED 364 632)

-----

This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0035. The opinions in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

---

**Title:** Making a Community Interesting to Itself: Providing a Social Education through Urban History and Neighborhood Studies. ERIC Digest.

**Note:** Digest Number 170.

**Document Type:** Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);

**Available From:** ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027. Tel: 800-601-4868 (Toll Free); Web site: <http://www.eric-web.tc.columbia.edu>.

**Descriptors:** Higher Education, Secondary Education, Social Studies, Urban Areas, Urban Studies

**Identifiers:** ERIC Digests

###



[\[Return to ERIC Digest Search Page\]](#)