The experience of living in a city is one vital thread that connects us with our ancient, medieval, and early modern ancestors, and that continues to provide a unifying element in millions of our contemporaries’ disparate lives across the globe. During your studies at NYU, urban life will be a constant environment and stimulus, whether you find yourself in New York, Florence, Accra, or Shanghai.

The aim of the course is to supply conceptual frameworks and historical contexts for this experience by exploring the ways human communities have been theorized and imagined within the Western tradition from classical antiquity through to the Renaissance. The particular intellectual focuses of the course are the city, conceived since Aristotle as the proper habitat of humankind, and the relationship between the family or household and the state. The primary texts encompass utopian writings and works of political theory, but also texts describing and analyzing real-world communities and visual and cartographic representations of cities and urban space. Readings include the canonical—from Plato, Aristotle, Vergil, Dante, Boccaccio, More, Shakespeare—to texts from Christine de Pizan and Moderata Fonte, long marginalized from the canon and only now becoming visible.