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The Interdisciplinary  
Future of the Urban  
Geo-Humanities

**Benjamin Fraser**





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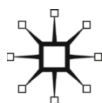


# Digital Cities: The Interdisciplinary Future of the Urban Geo-Humanities

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Research takes strange turns – one idea leads to the next, and not always in the direction suggested by time’s flow or the interests of teleological thinking. Reading Gilles Deleuze, I found Henri Bergson; reading David Harvey, I found Henri Lefebvre; and somehow by delving into the historical, methodological and theoretical layers of a future Urban Studies, I found the past and current strata of the Digital Social Sciences and Humanities. Another way to say this is that the sheets of past contain the future. And many times in embracing the future, we end up in a place more frustratingly familiar than we had expected – as is dramatized in this mid-length Palgrave Macmillan book project’s Epilogue, which is conceived as an homage to Italo Calvino’s work *Invisible Cities*.

Thanks to all those at East Carolina University willing to explore the promise and potential of digital scholarship: first, to Interim Dean of Arts & Sciences John Sutherland, whose input propelled me more fully into digital humanities work; second, to Provost Ron Mitchelson, Dean of Arts & Sciences Bill Downs, Director of Research and Graduate Studies Mike Van Scott, Dean of J. Y. Joyner Library Jan Lewis and HCAS Associate Dean for Research Cindy Putnam Evans for their support; and third, to those willing to serve on the many committees of the Digital Innovation and Scholarship in the Social Sciences and Humanities task force during AY2014–15. In addition, I thank Chair Burrell Montz, Tom Allen, Misun Hur and Karen Mulcahy of Geography, Planning and Environment, and

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# Introduction

**Abstract:** *The Introduction to Digital Cities concisely integrates the three components central to the urban geo-humanities that are so often treated in isolation from one another: first, the interdisciplinary nature of the city as an object of inquiry; second, the position taken by various methodological approaches to the urban phenomenon relative to overlapping disciplinary traditions; and third, a theoretical understanding of the interdisciplinary structure and conception of current and future digital city projects. This triple articulation of an interdisciplinary object-method-theory is the expression of a single argument.*

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The end goal of *Digital Cities* is to chart a path toward what I am calling the “urban geo-humanities.” I employ this term as a reference to a specific and concertedly interdisciplinary area of research, one that enjoys a certain currency within and across fields that go by the names of the digital humanities, the geo-humanities, cultural studies and urban studies. In truth, of course, each of these growing fields pulls from some mixture of the sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. There are increasing numbers of existing digital city projects that might be classified within the urban geo-humanities, but there is not yet a concise or coherent theory that explores what the urban geo-humanities are, or for that matter, what form of urban thinking they represent. Nor has there appeared, yet, a full exploration of the interdisciplinary challenges that this area presents for researchers.

Toward that end, this mid-length book project concisely integrates the three components central to the urban geo-humanities that are so often treated in isolation from one another: first, the interdisciplinary nature of the city as an object of inquiry; second, the position taken by various methodological approaches to the urban phenomenon relative to overlapping disciplinary traditions; and third, a theoretical understanding of the interdisciplinary structure and conception of current and future digital city projects. This triple articulation of an interdisciplinary object-method-theory is the expression of a single argument. That is, the argument of this book has been constructed in such a way that the theory of digital cities outlined in Chapter 3 builds from discussions of the urban as an object of investigation in Chapter 1, and from explorations of interdisciplinary method in Chapter 2.

We might begin with the difficult matter of defining what a city is, which has long been one of the key problems of urban scholarship. In one way or another, modern studies of the subject have tended to repeat the same hallmark insight. This insight holds that the very term *city* is a simple label hiding a much more complicated reality. Our understanding of cities has undoubtedly changed since discourses of urban modernity began to take hold in the collective imaginaries of the nineteenth century. But in this single and general sense, at least, things arguably remain the same: to speak of the city is to speak of the material conditions of our modern lives; it is simultaneously to speak of both our collective social aspirations and our admittedly social failures. Whether we refer to the city as a center or rather a system of power, as a dwelling place or a workplace, a force, vantage point or an image, a node for production,