The end of the 20th century witnessed a revival of the notion that “Islam” produces a distinct set of urban and architectural forms, and therefore these forms should be central to urban redevelopment projects in the Middle East. Originally a construct of European colonial social science, this culturalist approach is now accepted in a variety of institutional locations, ranging from local architectural offices to the professional training programs in western universities and the major international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank. How do current understandings of the relation between culture and urban form differ from those of the colonial era? How do such understandings interact with, interrupt or refuse other kinds of explanations – economic or political – of urban development within the Middle East?

This course will shed light on these questions through a combination of major theoretical works and readings dealing with both historical and contemporary cases from the region (including Beirut, Amman, Damascus, Cairo, Dubai and Jaffa) and beyond.