GGR381 is a field course in Environmental Geography that
studies Toronto’s urban metabolism, which encompasses
the provisioning of everyday services and materials such
as food, water and energy, used by people living in a specific area.
Through field trips across the Greater Toronto Area and by linking
field trips to theoretical concepts, the course teaches students to
consider practical solutions to the city’s socio-environmental chal-

lenges.

As a class we discovered that within this space we call a city,
activities such as using a washroom, walking paved streets, drink-
ing water, or finding shelter in buildings, involved processes that we
may take for granted. Before taking this course, the production of
services and materials for urban residents was a distant unacknowl-
edged fact, but to confront the City of Toronto’s Ashbridges Bay
Wastewater Treatment Plant or the CBM Sand and Gravel Pits in
Guelph, where materials used at construction sites in Toronto are
extracted, was an awakening experience. Although some of the sites
were a bit – how shall we put it – in-your-face-smelly, the theme of
networks of provisioning was evident even when we were holding
our noses!

Through the various readings and trips, we learned that ac-

cess to healthy food or other basic necessities was often an issue of
social justice. As a class, we visited three spaces in the span of two
days that dealt with food in the city: the Ontario Food Terminal,
Ryerson’s Urban Farm, and Black Creek Community Farm. The
experience of food in the city for most people involves trips to the
grocery store, where the produce may have been distributed via the
Ontario Food Terminal after being grown using industrial farming
techniques and/or transported a great distance.

The irony one can observe in a place such as the food terminal
is that there is an abundance of food sold to supermarkets and other
retailers across the city, yet malnutrition and hunger still occur in
Toronto. Meanwhile, farms such as those at Ryerson and Black
Creek try to close a gap in the disparity between who has access to
healthy, sustainably grown food and who does not. Interestingly,
some academics have critiqued urban agriculture for subsidizing the
capitalist society we live in, which has arguably created the inequality and hunger in the first place. However, one can hope that the
pockets of change driven by well-meaning people such as those
running these farms, could amount to a significant social change—
especially if those efforts were not marginalized and rather became
part of a transformative restructuring in terms of how we connect to
food in general.

After our field trips and extensive readings, I have come to
understand that the city is actually an ecosystem. The course really
allowed for some deep thinking about the human place in our
spaces and how those spaces are defined and connected. Albert Ein-
stein once said “you can’t blame gravity for falling in love” but I can
blame this course for giving me a deeper understanding of this city,
its inner workings, complexities, and flaws, which has made me fall
in love with Toronto all over again. However, I also understand now
just how much work needs to be done if we want to build a more
sustainable and socially-just city.

GGR 381 students visiting Ryerson Urban Farm, a quarter
acre rooftop farm located at the George Vari Engineering
and Computing Centre at Ryerson University