

Capstone: Building a Life
UNCP/PHIL5550.01
Stokes 255N, 617-552-3868
Office Hours: Wednesday 12:00 – 1:00, Thursday 10:30 – 11:30

Fall 2017; Mondays, 3:00 – 5:20
Prof. David McMenamin

Once upon a time there were three little pigs and the time came for them to leave home and seek their fortunes. Before they left, their mother told them "Whatever you do, do it the best that you can because that's the way to get along in the world."

The first little pig built his house out of straw because it was the easiest thing to do. The second little pig built his house out of sticks. This was a little bit stronger than a straw house. The third little pig built his house out of bricks...

Children's folktale

New work comes out of old work.

Jane Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities*

Course Overview

Can we plan our lives or, on the contrary, do our lives just happen to us? Or is there a third alternative, something between the myth that we can plan it all and the powerlessness of not being able to do anything other than move forward with the currents and take what comes as it comes?

This course will explore that middle ground between the two extremes. Based on the notion expressed above by Jane Jacobs, we will approach the question of life as a work and as the process of working, a process of building or creating the works which are our lives. Lives are not created *ex nihilo*. Lives are built in the context of the places in which we live and have lived; they are built on the foundations that we have already laid; they are constructed in and through our interactions with the world around us. Building on the past, they are our place in the world, situating us in the present and orienting us toward the future.

Using that metaphor of "building" and thinking of your life as the thing being built, this course will ask you to examine past and present components of your lives, the cultural and personal influences which shaped you and any counter-cultural sources of inspiration that have so far contributed to the construction of your life. Then we will look at the question of how you want to finish the project.

Texts:

Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*
Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*
Tracy Kidder, *House*
Bill Shore, *The Cathedral Within*
Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together*

Course Requirements:

Participation

- Weekly reading, preparation, participation and attendance are expected.

Seminar Leadership:

- Starting with week #2, September 15, each week's seminar will be led by two or more of the students working together to prepare and based on the question of how the reading for that week can be understood in relation to the themes of the course, i.e., to the building of our lives.

Writing Assignments

- A brief weekly writing assignment (2 pages) in the form of three thoughtful questions done in conjunction with the readings (except for the leaders of that week's discussion) starting in week 2. Except for two weeks where I will ask for a 3 – 4 page reflection on something as indicated in the syllabus.
- Three in-term, written exercises (approx. 5 – 7 pages) which will be done in light of the readings and class discussions as they emerge:
 - The first one will deal with what led you to BC, a sort of pre-BC autobiography addressing the foundations with which you came here, the things or people that influenced those foundations and led to your interest in BC.
 - The second will be about your time at BC, addressing the academic work you have undertaken as well as the co-curricular life you have led, this paper will reflect upon what you have constructed upon that pre-BC foundation.
 - The third will be about the life you are living now, addressing how you are living inside and outside of the “house” that you have built; how that life has changed in your time here, and some reflection on what “debts” you may owe on that house and how they might be repaid.
- Final Paper: This will be a look at the future.

Attendance

- As a seminar meeting only once each week, attendance is an important part of the class. Unexcused absences can result in an automatic reduction of the overall semester grade. Things for which you can expect to be excused include interviews for jobs or post-graduate service programs, and documented illnesses. You should consult with me for all absences, but especially those not included above.

Academic Integrity

Boston College places great value on academic integrity. The policy can be found here:

<http://www.bc.edu/offices/stserv/academic/integrity.html>

Grading

Participation: 20% -- participation in *and contribution to* the weekly seminar discussion.

Leadership: 10% -- performance in leading seminar.

Weekly “three questions” assignment: 20%

Major writing assignments, #1 -- #3: 30% total (10% each).

Final exam/writing assignment: 20%

Class and Reading Schedule

Part I: Past and Present Stories and Building as a Metaphor for thinking about life

- August 28: Introduction to Capstone and this course
- September 11: Martin Heidegger, “Memorial Address” (handout) and maybe one other handout to be determined
- September 18: Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*, preface and Chs. 1–3.
- September 25: Norberg-Schulz, Chapters 7 and 8
 - **Written exercise #1 due:** the past that oriented you to Boston College

Part II: Building in the present and future: foundations and considerations for building a sturdy structure.

- October 2: Film: “Life as a House”
 - Also read handout by Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., “The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education;”
 - From that reading I’d like you to reflect in no less than 3 pages on whether your education at BC has been consistent with the principles Kolvenbach lays out.
- October 16 : “Cathedral” short story by Raymond Carver
 - Two discussions: on the film “Life as a House” and on Carver’s short story. Instead of questions, your short writing for this week is a reflection on the movie and, if possible, how the movie and the short story might be connected.
- October 23: Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*.
- October 30: Tracy Kidder, *House*, approximately the first half of the book.
 - **Written exercise #2 due:** the construction of your life and education at BC.
- November 6: Tracy Kidder, *House*, finish the book.

Part III: Building for the future

- November 13: Bill Shore, *The Cathedral Within* (This is a whole book, but an easy read. I will narrow this assignment down some.)
- November 20: Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together*
 - **Written exercise #3 due:** what you’re doing with the life that you have built so far.
- November 27: Patrick Byrne, “Paradigms of Justice and Love;”
- December 4: Last Class – Discussion and “pulling it together”
- December 13: Final writing assignment due by noon in my office by 12:00 noon.