

Course Description and Syllabus: Civilization? The City as Context, Crucible, and Creation

By Peter C. Brown | 2001 Knight Program Fellow

Knight Program in Community Building at University of Miami School of Architecture



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Cover Photo

Mercer University students on a field trip to Charleston, South Carolina,
as part of the course work for *Civilization? The City as Context, Crucible, and Creation*.

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Bio

Peter Brown is a professor of Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Studies and director of the Mercer Center for Community Development at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia.

Abstract

An understanding of “the city” as a contingent human creation over time, as the dominant contemporary social form, and as the crucible of civilized human creativity is an under-appreciated aspect of a liberal education. College students are often as ignorant of the city as fish are of the land. *Civilization? The City as Context, Crucible, and Creation* was offered as a senior general education course at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia during the 2002 Spring semester. The course drew students from across the disciplines of the arts and sciences. Students were introduced to these “urban” cultural themes through works of historical scholarship and social analysis, novels, films, and popular culture. The contemporary American city is at the crux of important issues of social justice, income segregation, global competitiveness, environmental sustainability, and regional governance. Using four Southern cities as case studies, which included site visits, the course required students to analyze the decay of the central city over the past half century, the concentration of African-American and Hispanic poverty in the central city, and the rise of suburban sprawl. Students were then asked to investigate recent efforts at sustainable development and an urban renaissance. With a focus on revitalization initiatives in Macon, Georgia, and Mercer University’s role in those initiatives, students entered into dialogue with city leaders, university personnel, and neighborhood stakeholders to propose steps toward solutions for the urban problems they identified. Emphasis throughout was placed on the passion, compassion, and vision of exceptional individuals for whom rebuilding community is a life work. The goals of this pilot course were to increase students’ appreciation of the role of the city in human culture, to deepen their understanding of the challenges facing the American city in the 21st Century, to model with them responsible citizenship as members of an urban community, and to challenge them to identify their own vocations as contributors to the matrix of urban civilization.

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Objective

1. To understand the history and cultural function of the city as a form of social organization
2. To identify the political, social, economic, environmental, and ethical issues that will determine the future of the city
3. To explore the capacity to work collaboratively as citizens to create products and processes that serve civic purposes
4. To contribute positively to the future of Macon/Bibb County as a desirable, sustainable, healthy human community

Background Requirements

1. Strong ability to analyze, organize, and criticize information from a variety of disciplines, media, and sources
2. Strong ability to write well for a variety of audiences
3. Strong ability to set work-related goals and work efficiently to achieve them
4. Moderate ability to form and manage project-focused teams
5. Moderate ability to access institutional and community resources for technical assistance
6. Moderate ability to use a variety of presentational formats (Powerpoint, memoranda, lectures, articles, seminars)

Expected Outcomes

1. A deepened commitment to civic engagement
2. An enhanced leadership ability in the workplace and public arena
3. A developed vision of the potential for Core District revitalization in Macon, Georgia

Required Texts

Lewis Mumford *The City in History*

Jane Jacobs *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

Booth Tarkington *The Magnificent Ambersons*

Robert Lupton *Return Flight*

William Julius Wilson *The Truly Disadvantaged*

Andrés Duany et. al. *Suburban Nation*

Course Work

This is a highly participatory class. You must be active, creative, engaged, and committed to be successful. It also assumes that you already know most of what you need to know to be successful in the class. The class requires you to apply your existing skills and knowledge to produce a number of specific products, sometimes individually and sometimes in teams. One of the most important existing skills you must apply will be the ability to access new information and resources as needed to produce expected results. As much as possible, I want you to treat the class as if it were a work situation, internship, or extracurricular activity, i.e., you are responsible for producing a high quality result in an area that matters to other people to whom you are accountable. In short, the class is highly results oriented.

We meet once a week. Every class session will include guest speakers and presenters. Most class sessions will require reading 100-150 pages prior to the class. You will have an assignment due every class session. I expect you to be prepared intellectually and motivationally to make class time count. Be prepared or be gone. Two absences from class may be excused (you must have a legitimate excuse), after that I will deduct 10 points from your final grade for each absence.

We have three site visits scheduled: Atlanta (one day), Charleston (three nights), and Memphis (three nights). I expect you to be able to go on at least two of these site visits. Your transportation, meal, and lodging expenses will be paid by the University. You must commit your time. If you cannot arrange your schedule to accommodate this requirement, please enroll in another Capstone. If you are unable to meet this requirement during the course, 25 points will be deducted from your final grade for each of the two required site visits you fail to make.

Grading

The course has two hundred points that you can possibly earn.

“A”	=	180-200 points
“B+”	=	170-179
“B”	=	160-169
“C+”	=	150-159
“C”	=	140-149
“D”	=	120-139

The final presentation, which is a class project, is worth 25% of your final grade (50 points). Each specific weekly assignment is worth 10 points. Late assignments will be penalized 2 points and will not be accepted at all after noon of the following Monday (-10 points). Class participation is worth 10% of your final grade (20 points). Class participation will be judged holistically by me on the basis of three factors: i. Evidence of excellent preparation for class, ii. Constructive responses to class discussion, and iii. Insights and critical questions contributed to discussion. Simply talking a lot will not necessarily be rewarded with a high grade. You will receive a mid-term and final class participation grade (10/10 points).

Syllabus

IA = Individual Assignment TA = Team Assignment CA = Class Assignment

Date	Readings/Case Studies/Speakers	Assignments
1/10	Course Outline & Syllabus Forming Teams	
1/17	Reading: Lewis Mumford <i>The City in History</i> Ch 1-4 Case Study: The Ancient Polis Speaker: Beth Stewart "Images of the City"	1. IA: Define the City
1/24	Reading: <i>Listening and Learning: Community Indicator Profiles of Knight Foundation Communities; Pre-Charrette Town Paper: Beall's Hill</i> Case Study: Macon—Beall's Hill: A Comprehensive Community Initiative Panel: Tanzerina Kennebrew, Stan Singleton, Charidy Vinson, Charles Watts, Lawrence Williamson, Harold Wilson	2. TA: What does the Knight Foundation Community Indicator Profile tell us about Macon? (700-800 words for publication in <i>Macon Telegraph</i>)
1/31	Reading: Jane Jacobs <i>The Death and Life of Great American Cities</i> Ch 1-6 Case Study: Macon—The Built Heritage Panel: Jordan Jelks & Gene Dunwoody	3. TA: Place Making: The Fifteen Most Distinctive Design Features of Macon, Georgia (Powerpoint)
2/7	Reading: Jacobs Ch 7-12; <i>The New Yorker</i> (January 21, 2002) Case Study: Manhattan as the Locus of Western Civilization Speaker: Mike Cass	4. IA: What is the city according to <i>The New Yorker</i> ?
2/14	Reading: Mumford Ch 14-15; Booth Tarkington/Orson Wells <i>The Magnificent Ambersons</i> Case Study: The Industrialization of Indianapolis Speaker: Jay Stege	5. IA: Who is the hero of <i>The Magnificent Ambersons</i> ?

Date	Readings/Case Studies/Speakers	Assignments
2/21	Reading: Robert Lupton <i>Return Flight</i> ; James Howard Kunstler <i>The City in Mind</i> "Atlanta: Does the Edge City Have a Future?" Case Study: Atlanta—Gentrification in Summerhill (site visit TH 8 AM – 6 PM) Speakers: Robert Lupton, Neil Shorthouse, Ellen Dunham-Jones	6. IA: Identify three critical questions for Robert Lupton.
2/28	Reading: Jacobs Ch 13-16; William Julius Wilson <i>The Truly Disadvantaged</i> Ch 1-4 Case Study: Macon—Borders & Slums Speaker: Randy Harshbarger	7. TA: Offer a critique of Mercer University's relation to the neighborhoods of which it is part and recommendations for strengthening it. (Draft it as a two-page memo to President Godsey)
3/7-10	Case Study: Charleston—Preservation as a Model (site visit Th 1 PM - Su 1 PM) Speaker: Tim Keane	8. CA: Outline of Final Presentation
3/14	Spring Break	
3/21	Reading: Wilson Ch 5-7; Jacobs Ch 17-22; Harry Wexler "HOPE VI: Market Means/Public Ends" Case Study: Macon—Oglethorpe Homes and HOPE VI Panel: Chester Wheeler, John Hiscox, Harry Wexler	9. IA: What are the primary causes of and possible cures for concentrated urban poverty?
3/28	Good Friday holiday	10. IA: Analyze Charleston through Jane Jacobs' eyes (Bulleted outline—due by 12 noon 3/28)
4/4	Reading: Mumford Ch 16-18; Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, & Jeff Speck <i>Suburban Nation</i> Ch 1-7 Case Study: Macon—The Case for the Inner-City Speaker: Randy Harshbarger	11. TA: The top ten reasons (in reverse order) why Americans choose to live in the suburbs.
4/11-14	Case Study: Memphis—The University as a Catalyst for Revitalization (site visit Th 7 AM – Su 6 PM) Speaker: David Cox	12. IA: Insights gained, reformations begun, and convictions strengthened in the context of this course.
4/18	Reading: Duany et. al. Ch 8-11; <i>Post-Charrette Town Paper: Beall's Hill</i> Case Study: Macon—Beall's Hill as Pilot Project for the City Panel: Kennebrew, Singleton, Vinson	13. TA: What design, policy, and management initiatives are the keys to the revitalization of Beall's Hill?
4/23 (T)		14. CA: Draft Final Presentation
5/7 (T)	Final Presentation (7 PM)	