

Corina Kesler “Build Your Own Utopia” (Advanced Seminar)



(The mountain-like X-Seed 4000 represents a utopian eco-vision for a self-contained high-rise city of about 4000 meters high in Tokyo, Japan! Designed by Taisei Construction Corporation as an “intelligent building,” the super-futuristically-named X-Seed 4000 would maintain light, temperature, and air pressure in response to changing external weather conditions. Solar Energy would power the X-Seed 4000 which could house between 500 000 to 1 million people. The projected cost of a building like this has been estimated between \$300 to \$900 billion.)¹

“Build Your Own Utopia” is an interdisciplinary course designed to help students clarify and evaluate their utopian ideals as they improve reading, writing and discussion skills. Using an innovative collaborative learning method called “guided design”² the course’s main objective is to familiarize the students with the main theories of utopia, and its contemporary applied variations, and to enable them to create, in the second part of the semester, their “own Utopia.” The first six weeks of the class are study intensive, anchored by four distinct sets of materials:

- a) a compilation of utopian theorists’ works (Lyman Tower Sargent’s “The Three Faces of Utopianism,” Fredric Jameson’s *Archaeology of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Ernest Bloch’s *The Spirit of Utopia*, Manuel and Manuel’s *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, Martin Buber’s *Paths in Utopia*, Ruth Levitas’ *The*

¹ Weburbanist.com/2009/03/09/retrofuture-urbanism-cities

² Guided Design: Guided Design is the most carefully structured approach to problem-centered instruction. The approach asks students, working in small groups, to practice decision-making in sequenced tasks, with detailed feedback at every step. Developed in the late 1960’s in the engineering program at West Virginia University, the Guided Design approach has since been adopted in many disciplines and professional programs, most notably in engineering, nursing and pharmacy, but in many liberal arts and sciences courses as well (Borchardt, 1984; Day et al, 1984; deTornay and Thompson, 1987; Miller, 1981; Roemer, 1981; Vogt et al., 1992, qtd. in “What is Collaborative Learning?” by Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean T. MacGregor).

- Concept of Utopia*, Russell Jacoby's *The End of Utopia*, etc.),
- b) Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent's *Utopia Reader*, excerpts from Plato, More, Swift, Rabelais, Bellamy, Morris, Skinner, Huxley, and Orwell, and several novels: *The Dispossessed* by Ursula LeGuin, *Ecotopia* by Ernest Callenbach, *Herland* by Charlotte Gilman Perkins, *He, She, It* by Marge Piercy, *We* by Yevgeny Ivanovich Zamyatin, *Anthem*, *We the Living* by Ayn Rand, and *The Mars Trilogy*- by Kim Stanley Robinson,
 - c) To deepen our understanding of the praxis of utopia, we will consult the founding documents of several religious communities such as the Amish, Hutterites, and Mennonites, as well as less known documents and translations from Eastern European communist archives. We will also explore, via the web, several intentional communities from USA (*Twin Oaks*) and from around the world: *Auroreville* in India, *Ecotopia* in Romania, *EdenProject* in England, *The Federation of Damanhur* in Italy, and *Or Haganuz* in Israel etc.
 - d) For the cinematic versions of Utopia we will watch clips from several feature and documentary movies: *1984*, *The Beach*, *The Amish*, *The Shakers*, *The Matrix*, *Gattaca*, *Blade Runner*, etc.

The second part of the semester is hands on work: working collaboratively, the students will

- a) write a novella informed by the narrative techniques of the Utopian and the Science Fiction writers we read, or
- b) plan and construct a utopian community.

Both a) and b) should take into account present day considerations of race, gender, culture, ecology and globalization. The final projects will consist of utopias created by the students themselves, presented to the class during the final part of the course, and posted on the official class website. The course work includes several short quizzes, two 5-6 page papers, 2- short presentations, a take home midterm, and a final project.

Last, but not least, the second, implied objective of the course is to help you improve reading, writing, and most importantly, your critical skills. By the end of the course, I expect you to think analytically about the concept of utopia, to understand the complexities that go into producing a functional individual and a viable society, and to hopefully translate these skills in your daily encounters with complex current affairs and conflict resolution situations.