Through interrogation of utopian declarations for twentieth-century architecture and visionary urban representations, this article sharpens the loose pairing of Modernist architecture and Utopia.

Utopia and modern architecture?

Nathaniel Coleman

It is a commonplace to describe twentieth-century Modernist architecture as utopian, but doing so arguably has less to do with putative social agendas than with explaining the failure of such work to deliver on extravagant promises. By interrogating utopian declarations for twentieth-century architecture and visionary urban representations, the aim of this article is to sharpen the loose pairing of Modernist architecture and Utopia. Consideration is also given to how undue emphasis on representation supports post-rationalisations of failure as the inevitable teleology of Utopia, which serves only to empty architecture of its ethical function. To conclude, some preliminary thoughts on the prospects of a more convincingly utopian modern architecture are advanced.

A long partnership

Because Utopias will always be set somewhere, almost every description of an ideal society also includes reference to the architectural or urban stage upon which it will play out. Equally, even though the German philosopher of hope, Ernst Bloch (1885–1977) observed that, '[a]rchitecture cannot at all flourish in the late capitalist hollow space since it is, far more than the other fine arts, a social creation and remains that way', less obviously, this condition can also mean that architecture has the potential to be the most radical art, rather than only the most conservative.[1] Bloch's conviction that: '[o]nly the beginnings of a different society will make true architecture possible again' notwithstanding, architecture is among the last strongholds of concrete, rather than abstract, social imagination, even if this aspect of its potential is only very rarely explored in the present by architects and their clients alike.[2]

Interestingly, in his essay 'Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture', Umberto Eco supports both Bloch's view of the diminished capacity of architects for thinking architecture beyond the limitations of its given condition, *and* my conviction that architecture has precisely this capacity, though rarely explored. Eco outlines the obstacles to imagining an architecture that can actually project beyond what *is* as 'two unfortunate ideas of the role of the architect', both of which he ascribes to 'overconfidence':

> *According to the first, he* [the architect] *has only to answer to what he can take as 'programmatic' givens; here he may accept on faith certain sociological and ideological determinations made by others, which may not be well founded. According to the second, the architect (and we know what currency this delusion has enjoyed) becomes a demiurge, an artificer of history.*[3]

While Eco's cogent illumination of the varieties of overconfidence that limit architecture possibility is undeniable, my fear is that especially the second might too quickly become *prima facie* evidence taken as incontrovertible proof that all encounters between architecture and Utopia must end in certain failure. Such a conclusion, however, is only sustainable so long as the view of Utopia leading to such a conclusion is fundamentally negative, unchallenged by any dissenting opinion.

In point of fact, I would argue that Eco's own alternatives to the 'varieties of overconfidence' he outlines elucidates a utopian conception of the architect able to outmanoeuvre the restricted position its being 'a social creation' places on architecture. According to Eco, to do this, '*the architect should be designing for variable primary functions* [the use architecture and the elements out of which it is formed make possible and denote] *and open secondary functions* [the meaning connoted by a building and the elements that form it].'[4] On the one hand, this might only seem to redouble the restrictions placed on architecture; on the other, however, it highlights the shortcomings of confusing 'visionary' with 'Utopia' in the realm of architecture.

In short, the *otherness*, or *architecture imagined beyond the limits of the given* advocated here has little or nothing to do with either impossible paper projects or with built works that confound use. A kind of paradoxical utopianism is suggested here, cognisant of Fredric Jameson's observation that it is impossible to imagine anything outside of ourselves, highlighting 'our constitutional inability to imagine

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'… according to Jameson, "utopia as a form is not the representation of radical alternatives; it is rather simply the imperative to imagine them"'

Utopia' not as an 'individual failure of imagination but as a result of the systemic, cultural and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners'.[5] But this does not render Utopia useless. According to Jameson, 'utopia as a form is not the representation of radical alternatives; it is rather simply the imperative to imagine them'.[6]

Jameson also observes: 'it is difficult enough to imagine any radical political programme today without the conception of systemic otherness, of an alternate society, which only the idea of utopia seems to keep alive, however feebly'.[7] With this expanded conception of Utopia in mind (which I will return to at the end of this article), the utopian dimension of modern architecture is revealed as rather more tentative than many theories and histories might lead us to believe. More conventionally, however, architectural theorist Hilde Heynen argues that:

> *Of all the criticisms that modern architecture has had to endure since the 1960s, the one of utopianism has apparently had the most impact. It seems that, by now, almost everybody is convinced that modern architecture's utopian ambition was its most harmful attribute. Its utopian aspirations are usually seen as completely bound up with paternalistic, not to say totalitarian attitudes, and are for that reason discredited and put aside. The idea formulated by Paul Scheerbart, that culture is a product of architecture and that the enhancement of architecture would therefore result in an enhancement of culture, is denounced as utterly unrealistic.*[8]

Reconciling Bloch's doubt that contemporary architecture can open up perspectives onto alternative possibilities (and so cannot be utopian), with Heynen's conviction that 'modern architecture's utopian ambition was its most harmful attribute' (suggesting that modern architecture was in fact utopian, at least in its aspirations) presents a challenge for architecture today: modern architecture has been characterised as utopian in an attempt to explain its failings. But what if, as has been suggested above, it never actually *was* utopian? How then could its failings be explained?[9] More so, achieving this could reveal anti-utopianism as a shoddy cover for a poverty of social imagination in the work of architects including Philip Johnson, Robert Venturi and Rem Koolhaas.[10]

The lack of a political dimension in much contemporary work is observed by critics and supporters of post-orthodox modern architecture alike. For example, Kenneth Frampton describes the work of architects including Rem Koolhaas/OMA, Peter Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi as 'both elitist and detached, testifying to the self-alienation of an avant garde without a cause' rather than as engaged in 'the creation of a new architecture for a new society'.[11] The non-critical stance of these architects is in 'recognition that global modernization is pushing so-called technocratic order beyond its rational limits', but without mounting even token resistance to this condition.[12]

Perhaps even more telling than Frampton's not altogether unexpected reading of the neo-avant-garde is K. Michael Hays' comprehensive overview of that sort of architecture that attempts to set itself apart from conventional mainstream practices by being what is sometimes called *critical*. Hays notes that even if many of the same neo-avant-garde architects named by Frampton, and others as well, seek 'to subvert ideological hierarchies and closures through highly developed formal means', and

> *if the repudiation of the distinction between the aesthetic object and critical text has enabled these projects to blur the constructed boundaries between high art and mass culture* […] *a reluctance to treat in any specific way mass cultural and ideological formations and their impact on artistic production is still evident* […]. *While rejecting the elite seriousness of the modernist notion of high art as redeemed matter, these projects* […] *often serve up textuality as an escape from matter's grittier occasions; they provide spaces for retreat and contemplation, but few evince the differentiated spaces one might ask of an architecture against hegemony* […]. *And if an understanding of the affiliations between representational systems and power has expanded our conception of architecture's domain and responsibilities, these contemporary projects have, for the most part, remained remarkably silent on specific questions of power, class, gender, sexuality and the actual experiences of subjects in contemporary society.* […] *Most of contemporary practice's promises of destabilization, decentering, heterogeneity, and differentiated spaces remain apolitical because unparticularized and ahistorical.* […] *One suspects it is a symptom of the* […] *prevalent cynicism about architecture's reforming and communicative powers, and of the general confusion about what it is that critically conscious architects, at this moment in history, should be doing.*[13]

Hays is worth quoting at such length because he is so completely identified with theorising, mostly in a positive way, just the sort of work he interrogates above. Identifying cynicism and confusion as a primary source of this work's apolitical stance, which is escapist and can be linked directly to overcoming the orthodoxies of modern architecture, appears to confirm the veracity of Frampton's observation that the 'self-alienation' of the neo-avant-garde is an inevitable outcome of its having no cause, and as such it is utterly incapable of the utopian vocation for imagining 'a new architecture for a new society'.

Whatever the claims for Utopia as the cause of modern architecture's downfall may be, Bloch's position that it was not utopian is arguably the more convincing one, not least because architecture is so fully subsumed within the cultural dominant, and inevitably so, in a way that other arts can still resist. The role played by, or rather the necessity of, clients, real estate investment and development, the construction industry and, perhaps especially, economics – the expense of buildings – are the key

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factors that limit the capacity of architecture to flourish in the hollow space of capitalism. Perhaps it has always been thus. But arguably the problem is more acute in an age of 'capitalist realism', a reading supported by Sigfried Giedion's observation that the 'client's instinct for quality' is one of the main factors in the realisation of 'creative architecture developments', not least because 'in architecture the standard of values of the client is as important as the standards of the builder'.[14] When *economy* or *efficiency* are confused with *quality* in the world of procurement, it is no wonder that most (largely anonymous) architectural production leaves so much to be desired.

Ultimately, the logic of neoliberalism leaves architecture particularly prone to deterioration, transforming it into little more than an excess value commodity in a marketplace saturated with products competing for attention, with price often the ultimate criterion of relative value. Yet, my proposition here is that architecture can, and should, have a utopian dimension, but not in the way Heynen depicts modern architecture, which I have already argued above was rarely ever really utopian at all.[15] Consequently the utopian conception of architecture suggested here is closer to Bloch's, despite his doubt. In rare instances, architecture, even though primarily a product of *what is*, can begin to evince the 'beginnings of a different society' by providing a provisional setting for it in the present.[16] However, to get at the character of what a more truly utopian architecture might actually be like, of the sort that Bloch could have recognised as such, requires that its 'utopian ambition' be untangled from conventional representations of what this was and how it showed itself.

'… where many see Marxism, socialism, or even the stirrings of revolution in modern architecture, I see Fordism and Taylorism …'

As I see it, and would like to advance here, the question of the relative *utopianness* of modern architecture ultimately turns on what one makes of the obsession with technology and efficiency that so quickly came to characterise the Modern Movement in architecture from the early decades of the twentieth century until those following the end of the Second World War. The largely conventional view is to see in modern architecture something of the stirrings of a revolution of a Marxist sort, which is also supposedly the core of its utopian aspiration and ultimate failure. Perhaps this was true for some architects, though by no means all, and certainly not Le Corbusier, who saw the choice as between architecture *or* revolution, believing his task was to make the case for architecture, so that revolution could be kept at bay.[17] (But, of course, Le Corbusier is such a complex and contradictory figure that it is possible to see in any interpretation of him and his work a mirror view of what is asserted, potentially revealing its exact opposite.)

However, what I would like to stress here is that where many see Marxism, socialism, or even the stirrings of revolution in modern architecture, I see Fordism and Taylorism, and believe that viewing modern architecture in this way is revealing, shedding light on the *true* nature of the larger part of its failures and subsequent developments, which arguably are closer to its instrumental and productivist core than might be imagined.[18] Architecture's commercial heart, its capture within the building industry, and its almost total inability to be critical of anything substantive have more to do with the scientific rationality and the instrumental productivity of the industrial world, than with the utopian aspirations of Marxism, or any other progressive vision (Buckminster Fuller, Archigram and Norman Foster are just three examples of this).[19]

Utopia and modern architecture?

As suggested above, it is something of a commonplace of the historiography of twentieth-century Modernist architecture to describe many buildings and projects of the period – especially the most radical urban gestures – as utopian. However, this catch-all approach emphasises *representation* to the near exclusion of *process*; not the design process so much as the open-ended processes by which a setting might actually lay claim to Utopia, even partially. With the above in mind, what follows is developed against a backdrop of descriptions of Modernist twentieth-century architecture and visionary urban representations that are claimed to be utopian. Development of the ideas advanced here turns on a conviction that the retrospective nomination of Modernist architectural and urban projects as utopian has less to do with their putative social agendas than with explaining why they failed to make good on extravagant promises to deliver the world from the ravages of nineteenth-century industrialisation, or to make good on the earlier collapse of Classical tradition.[20]

By reflecting on the questionableness of describing twentieth-century modern architecture as utopian, my aim is to contribute to a sharpening of the generally loose pairing of architecture and Utopia. Most importantly, consideration of the undue emphasis placed on representation in descriptions of twentieth-century Modernist architecture as utopian reveals post-rationalisations of failure as but a cover for emptying architecture of its ethical function, rather than as somehow the inevitable teleology of Utopia. Ultimately, vacating architecture in this way serves to empty the discipline and practice of its social role while calming the bad conscience of architects who claim to act in the public interest, even as many buildings further blight the landscape by inscribing alienation ever more deeply into the built environment.

Even preliminary thoughts on the prospects of a Modernist utopian architecture and some tentative description of what it might actually be like – such as are advanced at the end of this article – could be among the first steps toward returning an ethical

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core to the practice and discipline of architecture, no matter how improbable this might seem.

One of the persistent problems associated with the utopian urge, especially as it has played out in modern architecture and urbanism, is the tendency toward confounding nature and culture in projects for reform, or so it seemed to architectural historian and theorist, Colin Rowe (1920–1999), one of the harshest critics of modern architecture's apparently utopian project, which was an expression of his despondence at the failure of modern architecture to deliver on its promises.[21] Paradise, which persists as a setting to be regained, is associated with a time before culture, when man was in harmony with nature, and so had no need for cities. The ancient correlate of Paradise is an Age of Gold (in fact, the two are nearly synonymous).[22] Rowe argued that the irresolvable tension between nature and culture that modern architecture attempted to mediate, especially in proposals for re-making cities, explains why it failed: according to him cities are fundamentally *other* than nature, so must always be distinguished from it. Nevertheless, modern architects and urbanists seemed to desire the return of nature in the very heart of the city – to give Utopia flesh by apparently eradicating culture (by doing away with the traditional city).[23] To get a sense of how this played out in practice, one need only consider how often the rich inheritance of dense urban fabric has been erased to make way for a new city that is supposedly closer to (human) nature (made in the image of technological rationality), and thus closer as well to a new harmonious golden age, heralded by the engineer as both the 'new Greek' and 'noble savage'.[24]

'… modern architects and urbanists seemed to desire the return of nature in the very heart of the city – to give Utopia flesh by apparently eradicating culture …'

Accordingly, Rowe's argument was in essence that modern architecture attempted to 'remake Eden with the instruments of the fall': science and technology, which are products of culture that confirm the human desire to master nature.[25] However, Paradise (or Eden) is generally depicted as a walled garden; a setting already distinguished from wild (undomesticated) nature. Perhaps the crucial difference between the Garden of Eden and cities is that it was God, the Great Artificer of the Universe, the First Architect, who established the walls protecting Adam and Eve's domain from the wild unknown beyond. But once Adam and Eve gained knowledge, they were too clever, too self-aware, to remain within God's garden, so were cast out to make it on their own, to approximate in their efforts the works of God in a mundane setting, especially by reclaiming extramurally the Golden Age of human existence that had previously flourished within the walled Garden of Eden.

Thought of in this way, the tension between nature (already modelled as domesticated and cultivated in the Garden of Eden – Paradise) and culture, as the cultivation of nature, would appear to be a permanent condition of human efforts to achieve a more perfect – just and sustaining – society, which must also include attempts to establish a harmonious relationship with the natural world (flora and fauna alike).[26]

In light of the indissoluble bond between nature and culture, perhaps twentieth-century Modernist efforts to make of the city a garden actually reveal an uneasy relationship with the facts of human civilisation, horrifyingly hinted at by industrialisation and laid bare by the dual catastrophe of the First and Second World Wars (to name just two confidence-shaking events). If the world inherited from the past was capable of such unspeakable horrors, maybe we would all be better off if we broke free of it, by renewing society through the radical re-making of it (even if by approximating the destructiveness of war through so-called urban renewal). Not surprisingly, such chiliasm was destined to fail, undone by its conviction that a break in time could actually reveal a better world fully formed (socially, in line with its new framework). And because radical reform efforts so often disregard time and necessity, they will inevitably be defeated by the facts of actual human culture.

Perhaps the most famous examples of attempts to 'remake Eden with the instruments of the fall' by transforming the modern city into a park-like paradise are Le Corbusier's plans for the remaking of Paris, especially the Plan Voisin (1925) and Ville Radieuse (1933–35).[27] Although neither scheme was even partially realised, Le Corbusier is widely blamed for the failures of modern architecture in general, especially as a consequence of the putative utopian content he supposedly introduced to it. Jane Jacobs (1916–2006), most famous for her indictment of modern city planning, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), was among Le Corbusier's earliest and harshest critics:

> *In Le Corbusier's vertical city* [of towers in the park] [...t]*he skyscrapers would occupy only 5 percent of the ground.* [...].
>
> *Le Corbusier was planning not only a physical environment. He was planning for a social Utopia too. Le Corbusier's Utopia was a condition of what he called maximum individual liberty, by which he seems to have meant not liberty to do anything much, but liberty from ordinary responsibility. In his Radiant City nobody, presumably, was going to have to be his brother's keeper any more. Nobody was going to have to struggle with plans of his own. Nobody was going to be tied down.* [...]. *Le Corbusier's dream city has had an immense impact on our cities. It was hailed deliriously by architects* [...]. [O]*f course like the Garden City planners he kept the pedestrians off the streets and in the parks. His city was like a wonderful mechanical toy.* [...H]*is conception* [...] *had a dazzling clarity, simplicity and harmony. It was so orderly, so visible, so easy to understand. It said everything in a flash* [...]. *The vision and its bold symbolism have been all but irresistible* [...]. *No matter how vulgarized or clumsy the design, how*

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dreary and useless the open space, how dull the close-up view, an imitation of Le Corbusier shouts 'Look what I made!' Like a great visible ego, it tells of someone's achievement. But as to how the city works, it tells, like the Garden City, nothing but lies.[28]

Whatever truth there may be in Jacobs' indictment of Le Corbusier, it is vital to consider that his city schemes were always primarily rhetorical devices rather than plans for action, his failed attempts to attract *whoever* to construct them notwithstanding. Although he may have argued fervently that they *must* be realised (courting money and power, whatever their source, in the hope of doing so), lest there be *revolution* and mass outbreaks of disease, as noted above, none of the much demonised city plans Le Corbusier designed ever materialised. At best, he produced small fragments of his grander schemes in his larger housing and institutional buildings, each of which is notable for its sophisticated subtlety and openness to life.[29] Along these lines, and prior to his decisively anti-utopian turn, Colin Rowe offered up an exceptionally lucid account of the interplay between Le Corbusier's constructed buildings and the generative force his generally unrealised (and subsequently demonised) city schemes had on them:

But, though he has derived so much from the study of the city, his own urbanistic achievements are scarcely to be considered to rank alongside his architectural ones. All of his buildings were for many years thought of by him as parts of a city, a city which was later to be fully realized, but this city of the mind of which, say, the Swiss Pavilion is an important fragment, though it has a formative significance for so much of his activity, and though it serves to rationalize so many of his innovations, was never charged with any of the brilliant spatial stimuli which the assumptions of its existence helped to produce in his individual buildings; and consequently one may well be left wondering whether this Ville Radieuse was ever a serious proposition or whether it was not simply a necessary mental convenience providing him with a closed field in which activity could be isolated and raised into prominence.[30]

The relationship of an imaginary whole to a real part that Rowe identifies in the quote above is significant for rethinking both what the actual role of Utopia for architecture could be and equally what a utopian architecture might actually be like (of which more later). It is equally important to register that what Rowe elucidates above is not a description of Le Corbusier as a 'paper utopianist' so much as suggesting that he *needed* the 'closed field' of his city plans to imagine his individual buildings as parts within a potential whole.[31]

Nevertheless, over time, Le Corbusier has been blamed for the errors of his so-called followers who certainly have done much to blight cities worldwide. But to lay blame for the failure of the critical faculties of imitators on the head of Le Corbusier seems to derive from a peculiar notion of responsibility: absolving the actual perpetrators of their incompetence and simplemindedness because, in effect, they were only following the unspoken orders of their *master*, Le Corbusier. To further explain the failings of modern architecture by faulting Utopia forever and always as the cause, reveals a troubling narrowing of the mind and imagination that plays neatly into the hands of the status quo. If Le Corbusier was indeed so influential or his plans so persuasive, this reveals a great deal more about his followers than about him.[32]

'When utopian projections become plans for action without a feedback loop … they ultimately tend to resemble more the science fiction prognostication of technological utopianism or the totalising qualities of absolutist utopias, than any desirable ideal good city or society'

Utopian schemes materialised may have originally been inspired by convictions about the 'good city', but when realised, most such schemes – plans for action fully accomplished – share little with either paradise or the ideal city designs that inspired them. When utopian projections become plans for action without a feedback loop – or are too much of a closed system, they ultimately tend to resemble more the science fiction prognostication of technological utopianism or the totalising qualities of absolutist utopias, than any desirable ideal good city or society. Ill-considered as settings for ongoing patterns of social life, utopias of this sort are pathological precisely because they are unable to accommodate time and necessity. Under-examined from the outset, such pathological, technological, or absolutist utopian projects descend upon cities to forever alter them, almost always for the worse but certainly rarely in the ways imagined or intended for them by either their designers or the clients who commissioned them.[33]

In many instances, such projects demonstrate a degree of formal or conceptual purity that can be quite appealing. The geometric resoluteness that is common to many so-called utopian urban schemes (from Boullée to Ledoux in the eighteenth century to I. M. Pei in the twentieth) might offer some intellectual comfort to minds searching for reassurance that chance can be removed from the dynamic process of design and the uncertain events of cities. Alas, such hopes will surely be dashed, or if not, pure places often collude in the eradication of possibilities for social life to flourish: their extreme geometric abstractness tends to leave individuals and groups with little or no clue as to how to inhabit such settings. One tends always to feel a stranger in them, equal in proportion to how strange such projects feel in the city, while simultaneously making the city feel ever more alien. These are places without a past and seemingly unable to foster a future. Consider for example City Hall Plaza in Boston, Massachusetts; Empire State Plaza in Albany, New York; all of the 'towers in the park' housing schemes, from Paris to Chicago and in the United Kingdom, including Co-Op City and LeFrak City in

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New York (here, of course, Jane Jacobs' criticism of such inopportune city-making is instructive).[34] As noted above, although the failure of such settings is often enough erroneously blamed on the urban theories of Le Corbusier, perhaps these accusations have some merit after all. But only because his imaginative genius remains undeniable, and thus it should come as no surprise that his many half-understanding acolytes felt compelled to follow in his footsteps, but in doing so, have done his reputation no good.

Reform requires a form

The most significant shortcoming of focusing on visionary representations of some future urban condition, such as Le Corbusier designed, is that it emphasises image to the near exclusion of any concrete sense of the consequences of what is being proposed. Operating at the level of fantasy, with a concentration on form, generally excludes almost any description of what life might really be like within the proposed framework, or, if tentatively described, how or why it would be that way is barely ever entered upon. In fact, although not generally expressed in this way, it is the undetermined character of most visionary schemes, including Le Corbusier's and especially those of his presumed followers, that has led to the alleged 'utopian aspirations' of architecture being 'discredited and put aside'.[35] In lieu of the persuasive draw of narrative subtlety that could hold the imaginations of individuals and groups, by suggesting how a setting might actually be inhabited, the default position of better-life claims in architecture has had no choice but to become 'bound up with paternalistic, not to say totalitarian attitudes'.[36]

The absence of some detailed description of the nature of what proposed improvements are or how they might actually be realised, or under what conditions they could be imagined as possible (in social rather than simply technical terms), assures that what is described will be at best a schematic abstraction (all but literally) drawn from its creator's head with little sense of how real individuals and groups actually operate in the world. If this superficial, or abstract, utopianism characterises the bulk of so-called utopian urban and architectural efforts of the post Second World War period, it does not encompass the full potential of architecture and Utopia. While there are twentieth-century works that are arguably fundamentally utopian, a utopian prospect for future architecture would do well to begin again with the nineteenth-century experiments of Utopian Socialists.

Although Utopia and architecture are now mostly conceptualised as images, much in the way ideal cities were represented during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, in the nineteenth century, both Robert Owen (1771–1858) and Charles Fourier (1772–1837), for example, 'proposed complete ideological systems for small communities of participants, regulating productivity, leisure, and the education of children', equally important is that the social organisations they proposed would be given a distinct spatial form, imagined by their founders as essential for the successful functioning of the totality of their experiments.[37] In Owen's case, he envisioned an ideal settlement housing an ideal social organisation, both of which, when taken together, were 'infinitely repeatable'.[38]

> [In each instance, a square would be] *surrounded by a quantity of land, each containing within it a number of communal buildings, such as a public kitchen and messrooms, schools, enclosed gardens for exercise and recreation, houses for the married members of the community along three sides of the square, and, along the fourth dormitories and apartments for older children and the unmarried. Behind the houses, outside the square, would be gardens bounded by roads, and farther out service buildings like the slaughterhouse, facilities for washing and bleaching and farming establishments with corn mills, brewing houses and the like.*[39]

What distinguishes Owen's village plans from so many other so-called utopian projects – before and after – is that the improvements he proposed were concrete responses to worsening conditions associated with, and as a result of, the rise and spread of the Industrial Revolution. Moreover, he worked out the nature of these improvements in great detail, ever aware of the potential relation between social and spatial forms. Perhaps beginning with a social result in mind, he went on to focus on how a particular organisational process would best facilitate its realisation and chances for success and thus for survival. Equally important for the potential realisation of a functioning social organisation (or process) would have been a specific spatial (or physical) organisation as its *counterform*.

If Owen's focus was on the character and operations of a specific social organisation housed within a particular physical setting, Fourier added to these a preoccupation with the fourth dimension of time as being equally important to realising and sustaining a reformed good society – even if only partially – at the scale of an individual building.

'… a utopian prospect for future architecture would do well to begin again with the nineteenth-century experiments of Utopian Socialists'

In contrast to Owen's ideal organisation taking the form of a village, Fourier's ideal society, or 'phalanx', would be housed in a single building, which he called a 'Phalanstery'. Each such ideal society writ small would be organised with a 'central unit for public uses (dining hall, library, post office, chapel)' and so on. On either side of this central unit there would be, 'a wing for workshops' in one, and 'a market and other activities that' required contact with outsiders in the other. Above both the central unit and its flanking wings there would be 'multi storey habitations or private apartments opening onto

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interior streets'. And 'a visitors' hostel' was housed within the attic floor.[40]

As important as the physical organisation of his community was to Fourier, equally important was the organisation of labour according to its duration and appropriateness for specific members of the community at a particular maturational stage of their lives, e.g. children like mess, so they are on the garbage detail, and the more miserable a job, the shorter the period of time given over to it per day. Although the 'problem with Utopian socialism' could be said to be 'that it does not concern itself with *how to get there*' because it presumes 'that the power of its own vision is sufficient', and as such necessarily neglects '*who* the *agent* of the struggle for socialism may be, and, instead of deriving its ideal from criticism of existing conditions, it plucks its vision readymade from the creator's own mind',[41] it is worth noting that a 'small version of the Fourier model was built' during the nineteenth century 'by the industrialist Jean-Baptiste Godin' for workers at his 'iron foundry at Guise on the Oise, northeast of Paris', which, most importantly, 'still survives'.[42]

Although the ideal city schemes of Owen and Fourier may in general belong to the tradition of Utopian visions extending back through the Enlightenment (including projects by Ledoux and Boullée) to the Reniassance (including Filarete among others), what distinguishes the Utopian Socialist schemes of the nineteenth century is the empathy they manifest for the masses, revealed in 'their determination to bring a humane fullness to the lives of the toiling working classes'.[43] This difference is significant. Renaissance architects imagined their audience was the Prince; Enlightenment architects needed to get close to power wherever it lay. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, economic speculation definitively replaced the commissioning authority of aristocratic rulers, meaning that realisation would have to be subsidised by the state, unlikely in a capitalist democracy and questionable if realised by an absolutist regime. Nevertheless, Ebenezer Howard's (1850–1928) Garden City emerged as something of an echo of Owen's villages, and Le Corbusier's *unites d'habitations* recollected something of Fourier's phalansteries.[44] Jane Jacobs observes this same division of city design labours between Howard and Le Corbusier, though for her, as for many who rehearse her conclusions, there is little if anything positive in it.[45]

However, if Owen and Fourier could not imagine separating their utopian ideas of process (the social organisation of a better society) from their utopian ideas of form (how that better society would be facilitated by the physical framework provided for it), pretty much all subsequent so-called utopian architecture and city schemes (including Howard and Le Corbusier's) have fallen into a trap of imagining that utopian ideas of form would be enough, that concrete could somehow determine behaviour, or at the very least improve it. This peculiar brand of instrumental social science translated into built form endured until the failure of architecture to do much beyond providing shelter – at least in its Modernist guise – could no longer be ignored.

During the post Second World War period, beginning especially by the 1950s, the idea of any association between Utopia and architecture or the city became inescapably suspect. Although movements of architects engaging in a constructive critique of orthodox modern architecture envisioned something deeper and richer, mostly by way of an anthropological approach (Aldo van Eyck, 1918–1999, for example), modern architecture was largely rejected, albeit at either the superficial level of image on the one hand or for its supposed social agenda on the other. Apart from the work of Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991), until David Harvey's *Spaces of Hope* (2000), little in the way of rethinking the role of architecture in Utopia, or of Utopia in architecture has taken place.[46] And even now, within architecture and urbanism, sustained reconsiderations of Utopia have yet to take hold, beyond relatively isolated efforts.[47] In short, architecture theory and practice have yet to move beyond Jacobs' or Rowe's wholly negative view of Utopia in modern architecture and urbanism as authoritarian, deterministic, socially blind, and as such are incapable of seeing the sparks of Utopia in the everyday, as could Lefebvre. Limited by a reductive view of it as failure or worse, Utopia remains all but impossible to imagine as anything thicker than some kind of visionary image that is defined as utopian precisely because of its apparent infeasibility (Ruth Eaton's *Ideal Cities: Utopianism and the (Un)Built Environment* is a revealing example of this).[48]

Scientific Utopia?

Utopian Socialist projects, such as those by Fourier and Owen described above, were rejected by Marx and Engels for attempting to act on the historical process in a manner that they judged as being out of step with those processes, which is why they called such efforts 'utopian', in the sense of being impractical at best and impossibly naïve at worst.[49] By attempting to act on history by a force of will alone, and out of step with *historical processes*, before a re-formed world consciousness has taken shape, apparently meant that the projects of the Utopian Socialists could only be manifestations of a distorted *false consciousness*. So long as the Revolution was believed to be sure to come, as a teleological certainty, the luxury of such a rejection was sustainable.

However, as the Revolution has yet to appear anywhere on the horizon, and does not look likely to do so any time soon, the projects of the nineteenth-century socialists are now arguably more relevant, in a concrete sense, than Marx's grand historical system, which, as Lefebvre observed, could not account for the problem of the relationship between space and society, especially in cities.[50] The deep historical roots of the Utopian Socialist projects of the nineteenth century, penetrating at least into the Renaissance through Filarete and More, for example, and perhaps deeper to monastic orders and their

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settings, and even to Plato, suggests that their experiments might yet contain much relevance, even today, for rethinking the architectural and social conditions of the present. In point of fact, Le Corbusier's most convincingly utopian experiments and built works – La Tourette for example – sit along this line.[51]

Prospects for a Modernist utopian architecture

It is fair to say that even if Modern Architecture were actually utopian in the way that histories of it claim it was, in most instances the architecture ultimately changes little or nothing for the people inhabiting it.[52] Perhaps. But if a work is in some way positively utopian in the ways outlined here, it will stand as a record of the architect's desire – full stop – but also of his or her struggle to bring about the realisation of a Good Society by beginning with the provision of a framework for it. And in that sense, a work of verifiably utopian architecture will arguably endure as a testament to its architect's part in the realisation (or suggestion) of a better condition, no matter how long or short lived its functioning as envisioned might have been (Aldo van Eyck's Amsterdam Orphanage is a compelling example of this).[53] Thought of in this way, the requirement of duration is worth thinking about; conventional criticism of Utopia places it in a double bind: on the one hand, utopias are suspect for the attempt they apparently register for exiting history, for achieving a static condition unbound by time and necessity. On the other, when a utopian experiment ceases to function as intended, either in terms of its settings or its processes, it is deemed to have been a failure, from beginning to end.

Although no matter its duration, the utopian dimension of architecture rarely materialises, but as I have argued elsewhere, *Utopia is the tacit coefficient of architectural invention* nonetheless, and, in those instances when a work effectively derives from – while revealing the veracity of – this equation, the architecture will be a marker of desire.[54] And arguably could remain so long after its original purpose and mode of inhabitation have been superseded (and especially when they have not been). Thus, in much the way art both defies time and speaks ever to the future, verifiably utopian architecture endures as a trace of its originating desire and possibilities, extensible across long expanses of time (think of Michelangelo's enduringly astonishing painting, sculpture and architecture, the Campidoglio for example).

As Paul Ricoeur observed, there are 'pathological utopias' and there are 'constitutive utopias'.[55] Defining how and why a particular Utopia verges toward the one rather than the other is often a matter of degree but making the judgement seems always to depend on the extent to which a given utopian project – whether of form or process (or both) – is absolutist in its requirement for complete application all at once as a constructed fact in the present. When this is the case, little room is left available for re-evaluation, which, in Ricoeur's terms, would make such a work pathological. Utopian imaginings of this sort, requiring total manifestation all at once, tend to be so brittle as to break or shatter upon entering into reality. On the other hand, a project supple enough to survive incremental application over time while also being responsive to the demands of time and necessity presented by the real individuals or group for whom it is intended (often in unanticipated, or unimagined, ways), will be constitutive.[56]

In Ricoeur's terms, the constitutive dimension of Utopia supports the idea that the *space* of utopias is primarily literary, suggesting that in all its variety of forms, it exists foremost as a product of the imagination. Consequently, attempts to construct any Utopia in external – concrete – reality can only ever approach partial realisation. If the literary imaginary (or narrative) aspect of utopian conceptions is embraced, the degree to which any Utopia can at best only hope to inform action (realised forms and ongoing processes alike) may become more tolerable. A utopian mindset of this sort could, in the realms of architecture and urbanism, result in built works that are flexible enough to be inflected by time and necessity (ever open to potential transformation by the uncertainties of history and unfolding – though yet to be written – stories of inhabitation, even during design and construction). Such projects would need to be robust enough to survive instauration with something of their originating idealism intact. Elastic, rather than stiff; provisional rather than absolute; these places are – by design – opened up to perpetual interpretation by transforming occupation, which finds in such settings a stage for its own elaboration; elaborations that modify even as the alterations they bring continue to be contained, and to some degree absorbed, by the perpetually reworked conditions of the structure that provides a setting for them.

However, a paradox remains: openness of an architectural or urban framework to its transformation, or perpetual change, through use does not suggest projects that are so undefined as to be amorphous or indeterminate. Rather, the more precise the definition, the more available a setting will be for unanticipated appropriation of it, offering clues in equal measure of how to inhabit it but also of how this might be superseded, or even improved upon. Closure thus remains an open question: too much of it and all sorts of freedoms will be stifled, too little of it and liberty will have no place to flourish. The balance between openings and finality, in terms of both form and social processes, is the heart of the matter of a place for Utopia in the invention of architecture in the present and also of the prospects for architecture as potentially a place for utopian elaborations (the architecture of Aldo van Eyck and Herman Hertzberger offer a good place to start). As presented here, this is an equation very close to David Harvey's proposal for a 'dialectical utopianism', the spatial practices of which he describes as follows:

> *The architecture of dialectical utopianism must be grounded in contingent matrices of existing and*

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> *already achieved social relations. These comprise political-economic processes, assemblages of technological capacities, and the superstructural features of law, knowledge, political beliefs, and the like. It must also acknowledge its embeddedness in a physical and ecological world which is always changing. To paraphrase Marx, we architects all exercise the will to create but do so under conditions not chosen or created by ourselves. Furthermore, since we can never be entirely sure of the full implications of our actions, the resultant trajectories of historical-geographical change always escape from the total control of our individual or collective wills.*[57]

While Harvey, like Lefebvre, will not be drawn on the exact appearance of the dialectical utopian architecture he describes, its character is quite clear: it will be a response to conditions both established and in flux and will be able to contain the energy of consistency and unpredictability alike, to be inflected by these conditions. Because it is a description of responsive capacities rather than a taxonomy of visionary images, the architecture of dialectical utopianism is never final. Each instance of it will be a reworking of its possibilities. The concepts underpinning it are thus theoretical rather than explicit and as such, are generative rather than instrumental. Or, as David Harvey put it:

> *until we insurgent architects know the courage of our minds and are prepared to take an equally speculative plunge into some unknown, we too will continue to be the objects of historical geography (like worker bees) rather than active subjects, consciously pushing human possibilities to their limits.*[58]

The activities of insurgent architects, as described by Harvey, and the possibility of Utopia this would assure, which I have attempted to develop here, suggests modes of practice altogether different from the self-soothing stories so many architects tell themselves and others about being either autonomous or acting on behalf of the people, which, although they prevail in the present, largely reproduces their mostly futile attempts to do either.

Notes

1. Ernst Bloch, 'Building in Empty Spaces (1959)', in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. by Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 186–99 (p. 190).
2. Ibid.
3. Umberto Eco, 'Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture', *Via 2: Structures Implicit and Explicit* (1973), pp. 130–53 (repr. in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. by Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 182–201, (p. 200)).
4. Ibid.
5. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 289.
6. Ibid., p. 416.
7. Fredric Jameson, 'The Politics of Utopia', *New Left Review*, 24 (2004), 35–54 (p. 36).
8. Hilde Heynen, 'Engaging Modernism', in *Back from Utopia: The Challenge of the Modern Movement*, ed. by Hubert-Jan Henket and Hilde Heynen (Rotterdam: 010, 2002), pp. 378–99 (p. 382).
9. Ibid.
10. Along these lines, Herbert Muschamp observed that: 'Philip Johnson, who played an important role in adapting [modern] architecture [to] the simplistic brand of modern architecture promoted by the Museum of Modern Art [believed that] [a]rchitecture was the moving and shaping of geometric forms in two and three dimensions. All else was sociology, a waste of time.' Herbert Muschamp, 'Foreword: Something Cool', in Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006), pp. xii–xiii. For more on the anti-utopianism of Johnson, Venturi and Koolhaas, see Nathaniel Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 19, 21–22, 49–51, 68–71, 83–87, 109–11.
11. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, 3rd rev. edn (London: Thames & Hudson: 1992), p. 313.
12. Ibid.
13. K. Michael Hays, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 283, 286–87. See also, Colin Rowe, 'Introduction', *Five Architects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 3–7.
14. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, 5th rev. edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 588, 544. For more on the difficulty of inventing 'true' architecture in the hollow space of capitalism, see Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, trans. by Barbara Luigia La Penta (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976). For a general discussion on capitalist realism as a kind of *closure*, see Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there No Alternative* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009).
15. For more on this, see also Nathaniel Coleman, 'Building Dystopia', in *MORUS: Utopia E Rinascimento*, 4 (2007), 181–92.
16. For a sense of how this has occasionally taken flesh in modern architecture, see Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture*. For a historical overview of architecture and Utopia, see *Imagining and Making the World: Reconsidering Architecture and Utopia*, ed. by Nathaniel Coleman (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011).
17. Coleman, *Utopias* and *Architecture*, pp. 125–28.
18. Two recent books have outlined the Taylorist and Fordist dimension of modern architecture: Mauro F. Guillén, *The Taylorized Beauty of the Mechanical: Scientific Management and the Rise of Modernist Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); David Gartman, *From Autos to Architecture: Fordism and Architectural Aesthetics in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009). See also Mary McLeod, '"Architecture or Revolution": Taylorism, Technocracy, and Social Change', *Art Journal*, 43.2 (1983), pp. 132–47. Equally interesting is the role played by Taylor and Ford respectively in two of the most important examples of dystopian literature: Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932).
19. For the technological utopianism, though not utopianism, of Fuller and Archigram, see Nathaniel Coleman, *Utopias* and *Architecture*, pp. 73–75, 80–83.
20. Nathaniel Coleman, 'Utopia on Trial?', in *Imagining and Making the World*, pp. 183–219.
21. For an exceptionally cogent overview of Rowe's position, in particular his anti-utopianism and disappointment with the shortcomings of modern architecture, see Joan Ockman, 'Form without Utopia: Contextualizing Colin Rowe', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 57.4 (1998), 448–56. It is also worth noting at this juncture

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that while much of what follows refers to Rowe, it is not so much because I feel that he is the most credible witness so much as because his influence on contemporary architecture and urban discourses and practices has been so far ranging. Of course, *influence* does not necessarily equate with *rightness*. In point of fact, I take issue with most of Rowe's arguments, especially during his long post-1959 turn toward anti-utopianism. But it is precisely this anti-utopianism, in particular as developed in *Collage City*, that makes Rowe's thinking such an important foil for the position I develop here.

22. Coleman, *Utopias* and *Architecture*, pp. 24–28.
23. Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978).
24. Architects Adolf Loos (1870–1933) and Le Corbusier (1887–1965) both conceptualised the engineer 'as a form of noble savage', while Loos also considered engineers to be 'the Greek of modern times'. As noble savage, the engineer was believed to be closer to some uncorrupted natural condition than the debased architect of the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century, which apparently afforded engineers a putatively privileged position closer to the wellspring of *authentic* culture, akin to the not yet alienated ancient Greek (Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 1960), p. 123; Panayotis Tournikiotis, *Adolf Loos* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), p. 10). For more on the role of the noble savage in modern architecture and urbanism, see Rowe and Koetter, especially pp. 9–31.
25. Emil M. Cioran, *History and Utopia*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Quartet Books, 1987), p. 104. I have been reminded by an anonymous reviewer that: 'for Le Corbusier, Giedion and others technology was not about mastering nature', rather, for them, 'it was itself natural as it obeyed natural laws'; perhaps, but in practice, and as broadly understood, the aim of technology is to master nature, and even if this is not its aim, this has been the effect nevertheless. A counterargument could make the point that the uncritical embrace of technology by architects and theorists during the first quarter of the twentieth century was either further proof of their naiveté, or of their Fordist hearts.
26. For more on the continuing influence of Eden on architecture, see William McClung, *The Architecture of Paradise: Survivals of Eden and Jerusalem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
27. Cioran, p. 104.
28. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. 21–23.
29. Chandigarh is of course the exception to this. For a sympathetic reading of Chandigarh, see Peter Fitting, 'Urban Planning/Utopian Dreaming: Le Corbusier's Chandigarh Today', *Utopian Studies*, 13.1 (2002), 69–93.
30. Colin Rowe, 'Le Corbusier: Utopian Architect' (1959), in *As I Was Saying: Recollections and Miscellaneous Essays*, ed. by Alexander Caragonne, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), I: *Texas, Pre-Texas, Cambridge*, p. 140.
31. David Leatherbarrow develops Rowe's 1959 reading of Le Corbusier, describing Le Corbusier's buildings as 'parts within a potential whole' that the architect required to imagine the full impact of his buildings in the broader context (*The Roots of Architectural Invention: Site, Enclosure, Materials* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially, pp. 59–64).
32. For a consideration of how Le Corbusier is unjustly blamed for the failings of his followers, see Tim Benton, 'Scatology, Eschatology, and the Modern Movement', *Harvard Design Magazine*, 8, Summer 1999, <http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/research/publications/hdm/back/8benton.pdf> [accessed 14 January 2011].
33. See Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture* for definitions of the various sorts of utopias listed here.
34. For more on this species of so-called utopian planning, see Nathaniel Coleman, 'Utopia on Trial?'.
35. Heynen, p. 382.
36. Ibid.
37. Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 580.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., pp. 580–81.
40. Ibid., p. 581.
41. 'Utopian Socialism', *Marxist Internet Archive* <http://www.marxists.org/subject/utopian/index.htm> [accessed 14 January 2011].
42. Kostof, p. 581.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Jacobs, pp. 17–25.
46. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
47. Two such isolated efforts include, Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture*, and *Imagining and Making the World*.
48. Ruth Eaton, *Ideal Cities: Utopianism and the (Un)Built Environment* (Antwerp: Mercatorfunds, 2001).
49. Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880), *Marx/Engels Internet Archive (www.marxists.org)*, 1993, 1999, 2003 <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/index.htm> [accessed 14 January 2011].
50. Henri Lefebvre, *The Sociology of Marx*, trans. by Norbert Guterman (New York: Vintage Books, 1968).
51. For more on this, see for example, Peter Serenyi, 'Le Corbusier, Fourier, and the Monastery of Ema', *Art Bulletin*, 49.4 (1967), 277–92. See also Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture*, pp. 115–54.
52. See for example Heynen, pp. 378–99.
53. Coleman, *Utopias* and *Architecture*, pp. 196–233.
54. Ibid., pp. 254–56.
55. See especially, Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. by G. H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). For a discussion of this, see Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture*, pp. 56–62.
56. For Ricoeur's development of his understanding of the concept of Utopia, see Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*.
57. Harvey, pp. 230–31.
58. Ibid., p. 255.

Biography

Nathaniel Coleman is Senior Lecturer in Architecture in the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape at Newcastle University. After practising architecture in New York and Rome he earned a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. His primary teaching includes masters level design, and a postgraduate urban design seminar. His research focuses on the problematic of Utopia and architecture, pedagogy and the city. Author of *Utopias and Architecture*, and editor of *Imagining and Making the World: Reconsidering Architecture and Utopia*, Nathaniel is currently working on *Lefebvre for Architects*.

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