After Postmodernism: Readdressing the Role of Utopia in Urban Design and Planning

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The last few decades have brought massive political, economic and social change to urban areas. Trends such as population growth, the rise of dual economies and oppressive political regimes, and continued transnational migration have accelerated urbanization and caused urban resources and territories to become increasingly contested. The question is, can urban design and planning respond effectively to these changes? And how do these changes affect places?

These questions need to be analyzed in the context of current theories and practices of urban design and planning. Beginning in the 1960s, many urban designers responded to the excesses of modernism by embracing such concepts as context, the quotidian, and multiplicity, and integrating them into design practice. Among planners, a similar assessment fueled development of a participatory model, sometimes called "planning from below," that expanded the range of participants in urban interventions to include NGOs and social movements.

For many, therefore, urban design and planning discourse today is based on critical reassessment of actual places produced by the Modern Movement—which has, in turn, suggested alternative ideas about the relationship between socio-political space and design. But this opposition is seen as arising within a postcritical era, dominated by pragmatic approaches that emphasize materiality and technology and that view public spaces as arenas for spectacle.

This approach has been employed worldwide in urban design projects that regenerate city centers through the selling of place image within a tourist economy. Examples include the celebrated Schouwburgplein square in Rotterdam (West 8), the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (Frank Gehry), Parc de la Villette in Paris (Bernard Tschumi), and Fremont Street in Las Vegas (Jon Jerde). Such projects celebrate the global economy and downplay local political agendas, developing technological strategies in lieu of real engagement with urbanization issues.[1] For better or worse, Mark Dorian has argued, the rhetoric of crisis that characterized the urban design discourse of the 1960s and 70s has almost disappeared.[2] Unfortunately, most current projects employ the language of multiplicities, differences and flexibility, but are unable to critically address important changes in cities and their urbanizing regions.

A similar decline in the critical assessment of space is apparent in planning discourse. Today, public-sector planning relies on nongovernment organizations that operate "from below" to produce alternative plans for market-based development. As recently argued by Bishwapriya Sanyal, this reliance has a side effect—namely, it diverts attention from public-sector mechanisms essential to social development and change.[3]

Planning from below has also shifted professional focus from the object itself (i.e., the city) to action-oriented participatory approaches such as advocacy and communicative planning.[4] These strategies, which map the requirements of different groups, deal primarily with distribution of resources, and operate within an existing order. As a result, the planning process has become a matter of inclusive negotiation, and can no longer foster macro-visions of social justice.

In summary, then, by focusing entirely on the concrete and pragmatic, the urban design and planning professions have dissociated themselves from universal questions. Furthermore, this is happening at the exact moment when these questions are resurfacing. Such a situation obliges us to reflect on what has been achieved and what has been lost through the engagement with postmodern discourse. We argue here that a reformulation of urban ideals and a resurgence of visions of the utopian are crucial to the future of cities.

The Utopian Debate

How is it possible that the utopian vision has vanished in this most urbanized epoch? How can we justify distancing ourselves from this discourse at a time when urban resources and territories are becoming increasingly contested?

One departure point for a discussion of the utopian debate is the work of Thomas More, who in 1516 defined utopia as both the "good place" and "no place."[5] However, debates around the idea have existed since Aristotle argued that Plato's ideal society was a false model on which to base the construction of political theory.[6] Aristotle's view was that only critical assessment of existing social and political realities could improve society.

More recently, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels coined the term "Socialist Utopia" to dismiss the idealized communities of Claude Henri Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen. They were concerned that these "escapist" movements, with their optimistic views of human nature and predictions for a better future, would strengthen resistance to Marxism—or Scientific Socialism.[7]

Conversely, however, other theorists have argued that the utopian promise is a prerequisite for social change. In *The Principle of Hope*, Ernst Bloch described how utopian thinking has contributed to the development of society.[8] But he differentiated between abstract utopias unembedded in reality, and concrete utopias grounded in the possible. To Bloch, utopia was a horizon, a place beyond reach but within view. By aspiring to it, people could become active in the production of a better world.

In an effort to overcome utopia's negative totalitar-

ian connotations, Karl Mannheim also sought to refine understanding of the term. He described utopia as a means through which groups understand the world, a process based on mental constructions (dreams, fantasies, symbols).[9] Every period in history has produced ideas that transcend the existing order, he argued, but these do not function as utopias; they were, rather, ideologies that integrated the worldview of the period. Such ideologies become dangerous totalitarian movements only when certain groups attempt to embody these "wish-images" in actual conduct.

In urban design and planning the utopian debate is far from academic; it is embedded in actual projects that people and societies still inhabit, and with which we still struggle. On one side, opponents of utopian thinking such as Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Jane Jacobs, Kenneth Frampton, and Aldo Rossi argue that utopian ideals require totalitarian coercion and physical determinism. For them, "utopia" implies static strategies with social and economic definitions, organized in physical space. Ebenezer Howard's Garden City and Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse were twentieth-century examples of such utopian visions.

Opponents of utopia often use Brasília as an example of the disempowering dialectic of utopian visions.[10] The plan of Brasília (intended for only five hundred thousand inhabitants) envisioned that all classes would live together in harmony. But Brasilia now has more than two million inhabitants, the vast majority of whom live in either satellite towns or squatter settlements outside the area of the official "Pilot Plan" (which now houses mostly the elite). For critics, the failure of a utopian scheme derives from its contradictory logic—i.e., utopia is intended to control and stabilize social processes, but in order to be fulfilled these processes must inevitably remain dynamic.[11]

On the other side of the utopian debate in urban design and planning, however, advocates such as Susan Fainstein and John Friedmann argue that ideal visions remain an essential catalyst for any kind of social development. Thus, conceptions such as a "Just City" or a "Good City" must be central to both theory and practice.[12]

As Fainstein has said, "today planning is mostly characterized by modesty. Despite some exceptions, especially the advocates for the New Urbanism, most planners and academic commentators argue that visionaries should not impose their views upon the public."

Such commentators believe that skepticism deeply imbues contemporary planning efforts, as typified by resistance to much-needed comprehensive new models for urban development.

The Contemporary Paradox

Late-twentieth-century assessments that modernist projects erected in the name of utopian ideals were massive failures have largely silenced contemporary utopian discourse. Postmodern opponents of such "visioning" have instead championed everyday life and celebrated a consumer society.[13] Such an anti-utopian stance, however, raises important questions. Can a discourse on the everyday provide more than an aestheticization of urbanity? Does a corresponding architecture of the everyday merely legitimate the use of spatial resources without social vision?

Hyper-engagement with these issues has resulted in an acute disengagement between lived experience and imagined space. Within the design disciplines, Bernard Tschumi has written, this has created a paradox, as architects and other designers have been unable to reconcile their need to address everyday life with a wish to engage abstract concepts in pursuit of alternatives.[14] This paradox is conspicuous in the polarization of contemporary American (and European) practice: one group is committed to social change, but ignores questions of form and material; another is committed to technology, computation and morphology, but ignores social issues.

Such extreme polarization has caused a detachment between form and social meaning, resulting in distorted communication. Theoretically, the socially oriented professionals are able to operate beyond the boundaries of the discipline, while the second group only operates within the boundaries of spatial form, presenting a limited reading of the city and its inhabitants, and thus marginalizing architectural practice. But, at the end of the day, both groups fail to articulate a meaningful vision, and thus also fail to significantly influence practice.

As an alternative, we argue that creativity and utopian visions are indivisible, and that their integration is essential for the progress of humanity. As Frederic Jameson has said, postmodern life is characterized by the fragmentation of history, leading to the vanquishing of humanity's hope for the future.[15] In other words, it is difficult to keep alive, however feebly, the possibility of socio-political culture without an "alternate" or utopian vision of society.

We do not believe that a revival of utopian thinking necessarily means a return to static concepts. Rather, it may involve new ways of using such vision as a tool for social change. As David Harvey has written, without utopian vision, capitalism produces landscapes appropriate to its own dynamics, which are destroyed and rebuilt over and over again.[16] Only by conceptualizing utopia, with all its limitations, can we hope to create an alternative discourse.

Utopia as Methodology

How do current engagements with utopia look? How can utopia address the needs of the contemporary metropolis? Can urban designers and planners mediate between the polar extremes of the mundane and the utopian, between daily action and wider vision? How can utopian models be useful in the design and development of places?

We suggest that a methodology based on thinking about and designing visionary places may free planners and designers from the pragmatic and allow critique and revision. As an approximation of what Ernest Bloch has called "concrete utopia," such an approach might contribute to the invention of new forms and ideas that could influence our actual future.

Such a utopian methodology may be particularly useful to three specific areas of inquiry: finding new ways to deal with highly conflicted urban situations; inventing ideal forms to help structure cities by giving formal expression to socio-political ideals; and creating new forms of affordable housing that address both population growth and ecological crisis.

The Just Jerusalem Project. One example of a new planning methodology that employs utopian thinking is being implemented with sponsorship from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The Just Jerusalem Project seeks to create a new intellectual space for urban problem-solving in systemically complex and contested urban environments.[17] A key component of the project is a commitment to interdisciplinary learning and problem-solving, based on a belief that innovations frequently emanate from such a mode of inquiry and action.

The project emerged, in part, from the sense that a new approach was needed to the future of Jerusalem, one that could transcend the present constraints imposed by nation-states, especially those within which it is historically embedded. In ethnically or religiously diverse urban locales like Jerusalem the superimposition of nationalist projects and aspirations has frequently fanned the flames of aggression and violent conflict. Could concerted efforts to think about the social, political, economic or spatial practices that would "emancipate" this city from nationalist blueprints be a solution? Could they, at the very least, create a partial foundation for greater tolerance, and perhaps even peace?[18]

In this context, the project's call to envision the outlines of social peace in Jerusalem in 2050 is not intended to replace efforts to develop a new formal order there. Rather, the two aims are intended to be inextricably intertwined and mutually reinforcing. However, the introduction of a utopian methodology requires new modes of thinking—which is precisely the aim of the project.

Such methodological action and visioning are especially relevant to the conflicted reality of contemporary cities. Today's urban warfare often transcends occasional episodes of violence to produce ongoing, tragic campaigns of bombing and destruction.[19] However, by perceiving of the underlying political conflicts only at a national level, disconnected from socio-spatial vision, we often only exacerbate them. There is a fundamental contradiction here: although this way of seeing exposes social complexity, it also blocks the implementation of social change.

According to Just Jerusalem Project coordinator Diane Davis, the goal of projecting vision into the future is to create space for discussion and for the kind of action that may be impossible while immersed in day-to-day struggles. In short, the project seeks to look to the future to create normative and discursive spaces for

change in the present. And it seeks to do this through a juried international competition and the establishment of a public platform for articulating a new vision. The key question is: Is it possible to address the fragmentation of modern society and also generate a vision that will include pluralities—across all boundaries—without erasing them?

Certainly, it will be difficult to bridge between a singular new utopian vision and the inherent plurality of society. But, as Davis argues, this is a process that intensifies voices, which is in itself a form of democracy. Perhaps this can also help define the role of the planner searching for the just city. Thus, the question here is not whether the project will be implemented, but how a process of envisioning can develop the discourse of place and challenge contemporary beliefs.

The Ideal Figures Project. Another promising methodology for articulating utopian impulses involves the use of ideal figures as an alternative to traditional urban master planning. Conceptualizing utopia in this way does not aim at the total transformation of a city—only at the reconfiguration of certain fragments, which can then be experienced as whole within themselves.

The power of ideal figures is that they are consciously bounded. Indeed, their failure to achieve hegemony across a larger territory is what guarantees their strength as symbols. In real terms, an ideal figure may be composed of

Above: Waiting, Jerusalem, 2006. Is it possible to generate a vision that will include all pluralities—across all boundaries—without erasing them, to construct a bridge between singular vision and society's plurality? Photos by Tali Hatuka.

segments of infrastructure, public space, and one or several buildings; it is a crystallized microcosm of an entire city on a controlled and nontotalizing scale.

Jose Louis Sert called such projects "civic complexes" because they concentrated the essential elements of urban life.[20] He envisaged only one such core in each city, but our view would embrace a plurality of them—each embodying as radically as possible its own conception of the city. As a finite figure, each such complex would leave plenty of room for others—in fact, it would evoke other differing and conflicting ideals. And as an assemblage of them, the overall structure of the city would express not compromise, but the coexistence of incompatible elements. The point, then, is to actively stage the last actual utopia of our time: that of difference itself—pluralism as a celebration of differing, yet coexisting value systems.

The illustrations in this and the following page show three different ideal figures superimposed onto the urban fabric of Brussels. Each contained the ideals of a certain time and agency; but each also proclaimed intention more than enacted reality. The Catholic Church embarked on the Basilica project at a time when Catholic hegemony in Belgium had not been achieved; the Administration City was conceived before the welfare state became a reality. But in both cases, an urban design project served to crystallize and articulate larger utopian intentions.

The illustrations on pages 26 and 27 were drawn when the author was preparing a project for several of low-income New York City suburbs in New Jersey. Rather than basing their form on extensive analysis of the existing situation, they are to be read as attempts to formulate an ideal: a resurgent welfare state in America's poorer suburbs. Like Brussels' realized figures, they are, at the moment of their inception, statements of intention, voiced through the form and the program. Thus they become vectors of a potentially alternative future.

Imagining such an alternative future is possibly only by distancing oneself from the constraints of the pragmatic and the consensual. Thus, a different socioeconomic regime had first to be conceptualized, one where the market has given some territory back to direct government intervention. While this is unthinkable currently in America, it is almost a matter of consensus in other capitalist economies in Western Europe and Southeast Asia.

From a methodological point of view such projects are related to the ideas of late-nineteenth-century German Romanticism. Friedrich Schelling, Robert Vischer, Wilhelm Worringer, and others defined the symbol as an ideal aesthetic category whose meaning is contained within its own formal structure. Such a symbol could operate as a prelinguistic ideogram or "schema," and capture, describe and summarize an entire narrative. Importantly, German symbolist theory was not one of linguistics, but rather a normative aesthetic theory of the sublime. Because the ideogram opened up content beyond words—without any existing outside referent, each figure could access the sublime in its own way.

When applying symbolist theory to urban design, the result is a form of public space that proclaims and describes its own order. Each fragment thus produced presents a desired destiny for the entire city; but each is also contradicted by adjacent figures and remains only a small fragment of the urbanized territory. Such radical pluralism may bring to mind Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's Collage
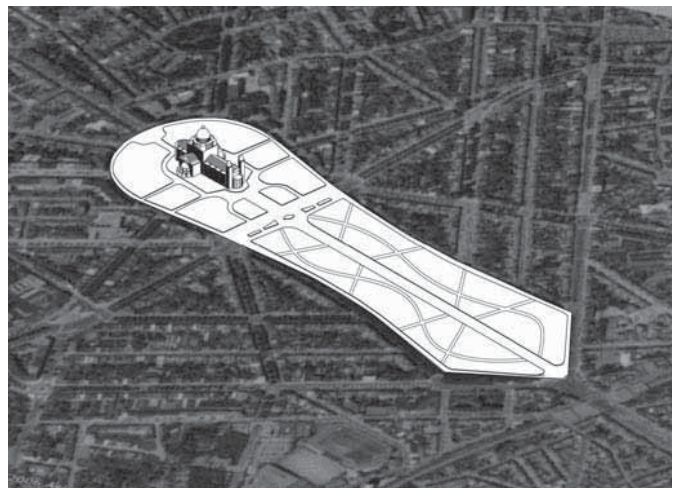
City. But Rowe envisaged the entire city as a collage of fragments. His concept was holistic, whereas the Ideal Figures Project rejects any wholesale formal strategy that might unleash the totalitarian drive within the utopian instinct. Furthermore, Collage City had a distinctly antimodernist tone: against modernism's totality, it produced its own. The Ideal Figures Project is essentially motivated by late-modernist principles, and its inception is already evident in some of the work of Sert, Louis Kahn, and others. Kahn's well-known project for Philadelphia, for instance, constituted no less than an ideal figure meant to reconstitute the city's downtown in the wake of the onslaught of the automobile.

The price we must pay here is to relinquish desire to make a form an explicit expression of people's desires. For

it is exactly that kind of naïve thinking about form, without any insight into the principles of aesthetic cognition, that has halted the utopian in its tracks for the last forty years. The form must liberate itself from any reification, imitation or narration of the social structures upon which it is built. Instead, it must be read as a prophecy, a statement of what could yet still come.

This method thus does not seek to "install" a new social order; thus it also avoids the pitfalls of the utopian tradition in planning. But it does place the utopian front and center—as a means to allow various conceptions of differing orders to begin to appear, parallel to the existing one.

Affordable Housing. A utopian methodology may also play a key role in creating new forms of affordable housing. Disregarded recently due to the focus on the

is whether the architecture and planning professions can address the socioeconomic aspect of the problem and suggest new design models, without falling into the deterministic trap of the 1960s. The controversial program HOPE VI, which has financed the demolition and redevelopment of numerous public projects in cities across the U.S., could be used as a departure point for thinking and designing "public neighborhoods" rather then as housing projects only.[22]

A methodology involving concrete utopias could be used here to help advocacy groups and committed professionals reunderstand the world through the development of mental constructions (dreams, fantasies, symbols) and new spatial configurations embedded in feasible economical contexts. The goal would be to readdress interrelationships among spatial form, public institutions, and poverty.
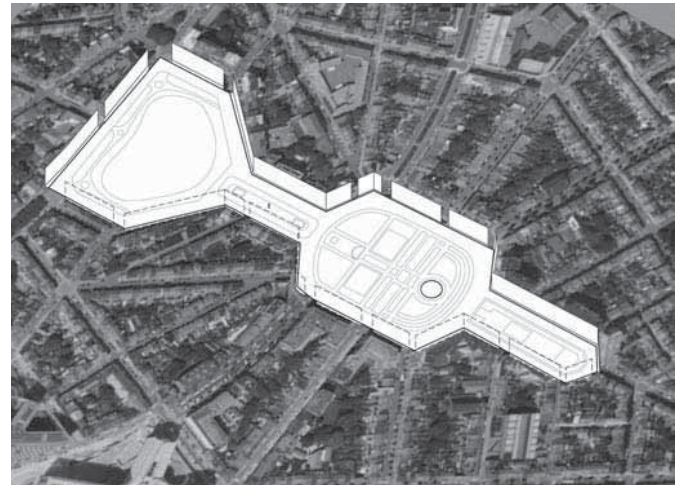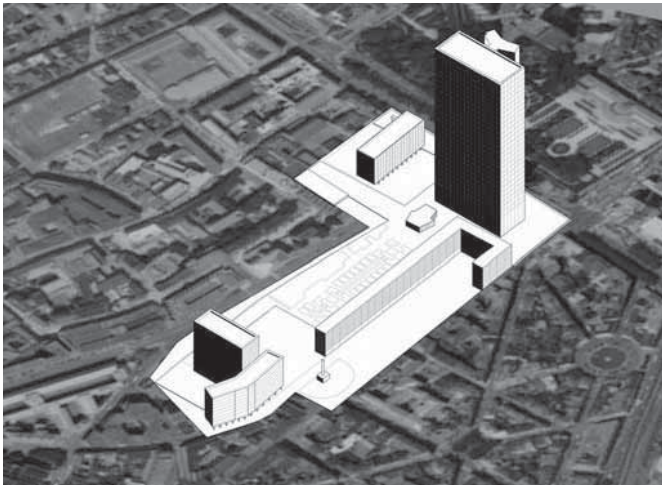
regeneration of cities by means of a leisure economy, the search for low-cost housing is, nonetheless, one of the traditional roles of urban planning. The paradox is that this neglect for new models and visionary housing environments has arisen in history's most urbanized epoch, at a time of complex superimposition of capitalist forces (global and local) and transnational migration. Yet in the United States, the demolition of large 1960s-era housing projects has likewise not solved the social problems of cities like Detroit, Chicago or Newark.

As Lawrence Vale has shown, the history of housing the poor embodies ambivalence between self-interest and obligation, punishment and reward, social assistance and social control, and individualism and community.[21] Poverty is often perceived as a public threat. The key question today

Isolation or neglect of any of these dimensions will lead to the marginalization of the design professions. But a new utopianism may help shift discussion from assessing modernist housing environments as failures to developing practical new forms of affordable housing.

Opposite: The Koekelberg Basilica in Brussels, 1890-1935. The ideal form of a triumphant, hegemonic Catholic Church, bringing stability when all that is solid melts into air.
Above left: Administrative City Headquarters in Brussels. The ideal form of the welfare state captured in a single complex, 1950s.
Above right: Sequence of plazas in Brussels, nineteenth century. The ideal form of the nineteenth-century bourgeois public sphere captured in a sequence of secular monumental spaces, with the public space defined by its private constituents. Drawings by Alexander D'Hooghe and Neeraj Bhatia.
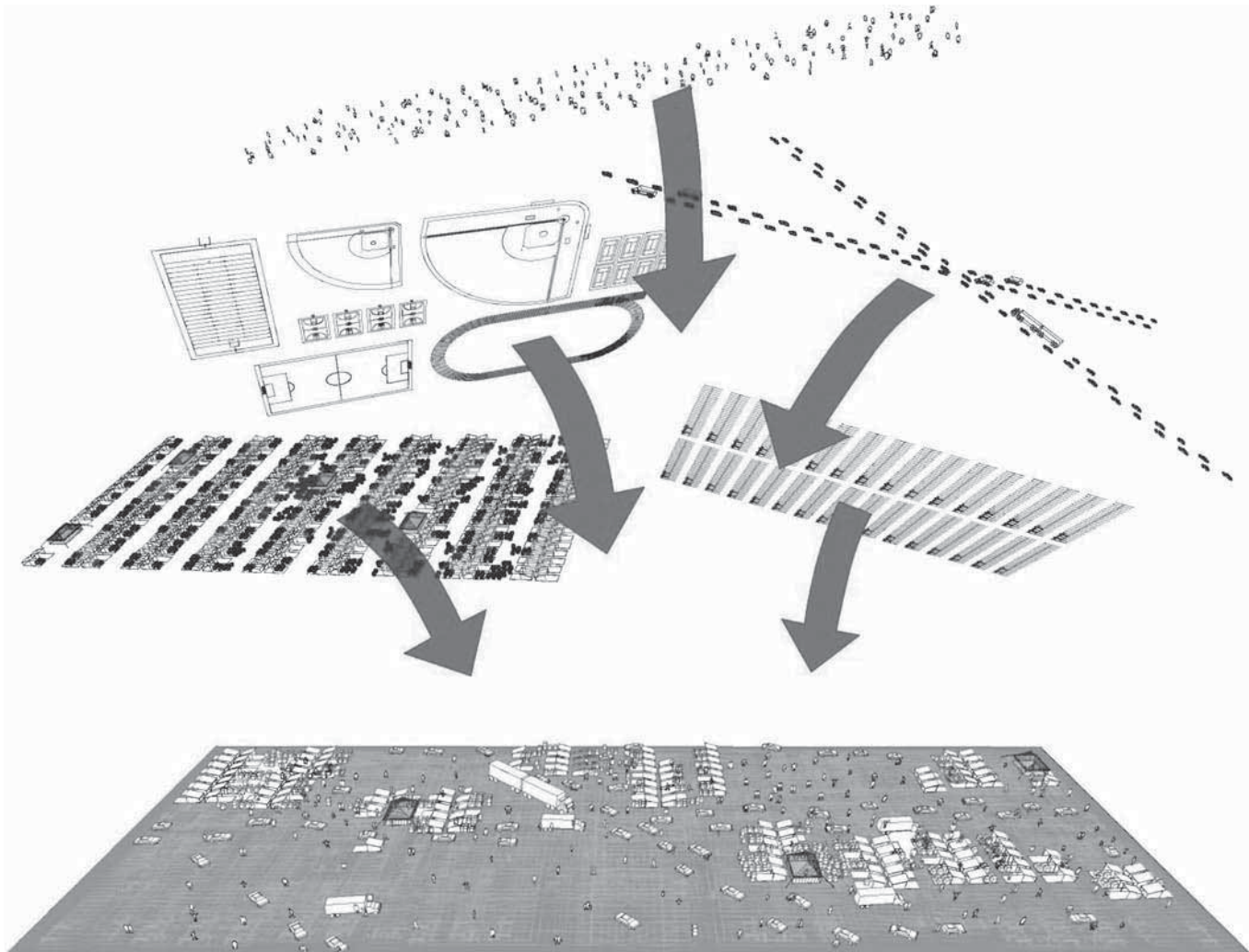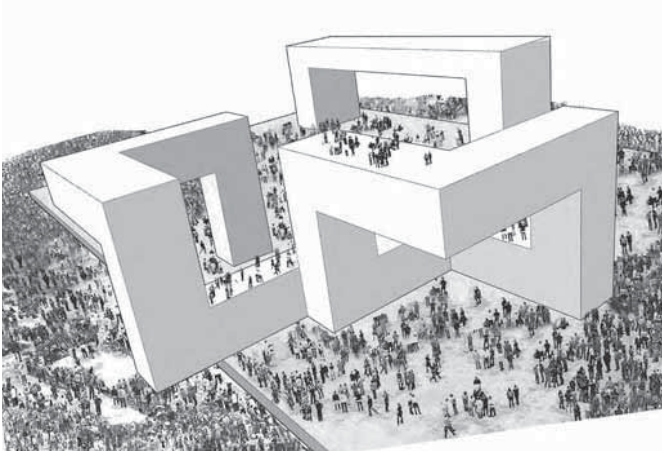
Places of Tomorrow

The design professions play significant roles in demarcating spatial order and negotiating and mediating among contesting forces. As a methodology for thinking about places, reengagement with utopian ideas may allow the professions to better address this social and political covenant.

Utopian thinking can be seen as a method of creating change, a different awareness; a critique of how we live, of our thinking; and as a methodology for negotiating all of these. In this regard, the utopian will cease to be pertinent when it no longer serves as a catalyst for change in our urban environments or an influence on other actions.

How should the authors of utopian visions arrive at their dialectic, and to what do they need to attend? The tools of the designer are her/his mental constructions and those of others (dreams, fantasies, symbols), as well as revised spatial configurations, embedded in an economic context. Nothing is new. Innovation should derive from the problem addressed, and from awareness of the socio-political state of today's cities.

It is clear that this mode of thinking encompasses its own determinations, closures and authority. However, the design praxis (whether utopian or other) is about confronting the dialectic of "either/or." It might be, as Robert Venturi has suggested, that the place itself is compounded of "both/and," but the product of design is an accumulation of concrete decisions about inclusions and exclusions of groups, forms, symbols. This is always the case, and it is inevitable. Thus, when applying utopia to the concrete, the discrepancy between ideal and reality may well be enor-

mous. Nevertheless, the aim should be to move beyond assessment of the utopian as mere success or failure, to embrace it as a tool for mediating between contesting forces, interests and communities.

Unfortunately, a paralyzing anti-utopianism has isolated the design professions from ongoing social problems. What will happen if we continue in our refusal to address contemporary issues through visionary devices? In that case, the design professions will cease to actively participate in influencing the social order.

By embracing the idea of utopia as a method of thinking and acting, the professions can regain their authority. And by applying the utopian methodology to concrete problems, the urban designer, planner and architect can become engaged in contemporary social struggles. By releasing the practitioner, at least initially, from market interests and ideologies he/she may invent the new forms of our social environment.

Notes

1. Murray Frazer, "The Cultural Context of Critical Architecture," *Journal of Architecture*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2005), pp. 317–22, esp. p. 320.

2. An exception to this are works that address issues of ecology and population density. See Mark Dorian, "Criticism, Negation, Action," *Journal of Architecture*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2005), pp. 229-33, esp. pp. 229-30.

3. Bishwapriya Sanyal, "Planning as Anticipation of Resistance," *Planning Theory*, 4 (2005), pp. 225–45.

4. See, for example, Paul Davidoff, "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning," *JAIP*, Vol.31, No. 4, (November, 1965), pp. 331-37. Also see Judith E. Innes, "Information in Communicative Planning," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 64 (1998), pp. 52–63; John Forester, *Planning in the Face of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Patsy Healey, *Collaborative Planning: Shaping Places in Fragmented Societies* (London: Macmillan, 1997); and Margo Huxley and Oren

Yiftachel, "A New Paradigm of Old Mytopia? Unsettling the Communicative Turn in Planning Theory," *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Vol. 19, No. 4, (2000), pp. 333–42.

5. Thomas More, *Utopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

6. Aristotle, *Politics, Books V and VI*, trans. with a commentary by David Keyt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

7. Friedrich Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, trans. by Edward Aveling (London: Sonnenschein; New York: Scribner, 1892).

8. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

9. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. from the German by Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985; orig. 1936).

10. Oren Yiftachel, "Planning and Social Control: Exploring the Dark Side," *Journal of Planning Literature*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1998), pp. 395-406.

11. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 173.

12. Susan S. Fainstein, "Cities and Diversity: Should We Want It? Can We Plan for It?" *Urban Affairs Review*, 41 (2005), pp. 3-19; and John Friedmann, "The Good City: in Defense of Utopian Thinking," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2000), pp. 460-72.

13. See, for example, Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski, eds., *Everyday Urbanism* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999).

14. Bernard Tschumi, "The Architectural Paradox" [1975], in Michael Hays, ed., *Oppositions* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), pp. 224-27.

15. Frederic Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia," *New Left Review*, 25 (2004), pp. 35-54.

16. Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*.

17. For further information on the project, see http://web.mit.edu/justjerusalem/.

18. For further information about the project epistemology, see http://web.mit.edu/CIS/jerusalem2050/.

19. Eduardo Mendieta, "Imperial Geographies and Topographies of Nihilism," *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2004), pp. 5-27.

20. J.L. Sert, lecture on *"Urban Design"* at the AIA Regional Conference of the Middle Atlantic District, October 23, 1953. Sert Archives at the Harvard University Special Collections of the GSD Loeb Library, Cambridge, MA. File D91, 6 pp.

21. For comprehensive analysis of public housing history and analysis, see Lawrence J. Vale, *Reclaiming Public Housing: A Half Century of Struggle in Three Public Neighborhoods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); and *From the Puritans to the Projects: Public Housing and Public Neighbors* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

22. Ibid.

Opposite: The space of the urban design project invites a plurality of totally different projections, a consequence of its necessarily independent form from the existing social structure.

Above: Assemblage of monuments into a putative ideal figure.

Drawings by Alexander D'Hooghe and James Shen.