

ON UTOPIA TODAY

by Barry Bell

En rejetant la ville contemporaine et en décrivant un programme de changement, l'idée utopique devient partie intégrale d'une pensée architecturale d'avant-garde. La vision utopique se soucie de la société, mais sans toutefois entrer en contact avec ses conditions variées. Cette vision joue un rôle critique et héroïque. Imaginée, elle n'est pas réalisée mais se manifeste à travers des travaux réduits, fractions de cette même vision.

Manifesting a rejection of the contemporary city and illustrating a programme for the form of its replacement, the idea of utopia has been integral to progressive architectural thought. With a distinctive clarity of vision, the utopian proposal always denotes a concern for society without the necessity for a direct contact with its conditions. Indeed, resting outside the sphere of daily actions, a utopian position maintains both a critical and inspirational function. The purity and vigour of an articulate utopian proposal defines a conscience for the existing city, affecting its own idea of itself. Its clarity of vision proposes the results of an imagined, but never to be achieved destiny—a hidden manifesto expressed and translated by other works: fragments of its own vision. It is the internalized nature of the utopian construct which, by defining its own boundaries and limiting the area of discussion, intensifies its role and value. A conscious other, a view of utopia posits a clear view of the contemporary society and its city through its very rejection of them.

Not free of inherent danger, however, the exaggerated clarity of a utopian position, necessary for its critical role, soon creates a new tyranny. The progressive utopian position proclaims a journey towards an ideal state, which, once reached, paradoxically becomes stable. This final society, theoretically a better one, exists as a form of dictatorship, both architectural and social. Constructed through a progressive dynamic, this supposedly benevolent dictator-

ship no longer allows the progressive spirit to co-exist within it. Conscience becoming dogma, the new vision of society perverts itself into its own prison, the return to Eden becoming a journey into nightmare. The utopia of Thomas More strikes us as a valid and witty comment on his society, but not as a very interesting world to live in.

Always stronger when less defined, any concern for utopia begins to oppress as soon as it takes on a comprehensive physical existence. Architecture, through its definition of the physical world, seems destined to suffer from this paradox. Attempting to express a new freedom, its very existence begins to construct the next prison. Perhaps fundamental to this problem is the position of architecture, suspended between social and artistic polarities. The success of a particular artistic vision, in terms of its influence on the works of others, often renders the original social position redundant; the existing city now a tyranny of its own making. The existence of Mississauga makes the appreciation of the vitality of Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse* difficult.

The alienating, and somewhat banal nature of our contemporary urban condition is, however, not so much the result of misguided utopian visions as it is of their superficial and second-hand application. The real failure lies in the reading of a utopian manifesto as if it were an actual proposal for comprehensive action rather than an element of a specific critical position. As a result we have the swing of dogma; each movement to define itself must reject the accomplishments of its immediate predecessors in the preference for a purer world. In both the futurist and historicist visions, the simplification and rarefaction of the image necessary for the coherency of a polemic position becomes the dominant feature once the utopian concern passes into form. In accepting this clarity as if it were a conscious proposal of style, the disciples of each position trivialise the power of the original statement.

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Rare are the masters who can endow the utopian vision with a poetic heart, allowing the work to transcend its own polemics.

This derivative development of valid utopian positions undermines their original purpose of making a commentary on existing society. However, the message expressed is nonetheless valid. On the one hand, the built forms resulting from a historicist position serve to remind us why progress was necessary in the first place. On the other hand, the forms of each brave new world make us despair of any cultural future whatsoever. “A new civilization is always being made: the state of affairs that we enjoy today illustrates what happens to the aspirations of each age for a better one.”¹

This is not to say, however, that utopian thought has no merit in architecture. What is at fault is the simple application of a general utopian position, not the discrete elements of its manifestations. Architecture is a sub-utopian act, creating fragments of a utopian vision destined to be intermingled with other fragments, all within the framework of the existing city. The vitality of this compilation forms, not a utopia, but a culture. The architecture of utopia, as a microcosm of a different world, has validity only through its juxtaposition to its complement—the present city. The courtyard against the street, the walled garden and monastery, the *van der* of Mies van der Rohe, the City of the Captive Globe—each enriches the city through a contrast with it, not by rejecting its existence. Creating a world of filtered reality and directed perception, the architecture of utopia may exist as a metaphor for a paradise, but cannot be understood as a prescription for a new one. “We may believe that it (utopia) exists, but in practice it is a world not to see, but to see by, an informing power rather than an objective goal to be attained.”²

All that a concern for civilization can direct us to do, is to improve such civilization as we have for we can imagine no other.³

What is not presently valid in architecture is the comprehensive rejection of an existing society necessary for a coherent utopian position. The relative failures of both the modernist and historicist positions, and their conceptual similarities, negates the necessity of taking sides in a debate long since futile. Salvation no longer lies in clear minded revolt, but in a form of surrender. Our true future in the rediscovery of the existing world—not an unconscious participation, but an active acceptance and engagement. This acceptance does not blind one to the alienation of the modern world, but it may point to means for transcending it. It is only through the whole hearted acceptance of the existing world, for better or worse, that a new path is possible, avoiding cynicism for a benevolent skepticism. It is the discovery of order from within the chaos that will provide a justification for architecture, an impetus worth expressing in form. Utopia, if it has any value today, is to be found in some form or other in the world that exists, as a fragment of delight within the chaos or as a crack in the armour of banality. The role of architecture is to discover these elements, to allow them to breathe and to give them form. For it is not greatly difficult to imagine a different world—what is necessary is to find a means to imagine and construct a better one.

NOTES:

1. T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, p.18, Faber-Faber Ltd., London 1948.
2. Northrop Frye, *A Critical Path*, p.165, Indiana University Press 1971.
3. T.S. Eliot, *Notes*, Op cit, p.18.

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