

URBAN LANDSCAPE BETWEEN UTOPIA AND REALITY

PEISAJUL URBAN ÎNTRE UTOPIE ȘI REALITATE

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Abstract. *The paper investigates the theme of urban landscape and its proximity to the descriptions offered in literary utopias. Clarifying the “visionary”/“utopian” opposition requires the revaluation and the reappraisal of the original significations of utopian space, as they are fixed by the literary texts centered on the idea of social and urban reform, beginning with Morus’ Utopia. Architects have always faced utopia, having to choose between accepting or refuting its ideological dimensions (economic, political, social). This confrontation led to interpretative speculations that encouraged a new architectural discourse, and in the 1970s many theorists declared the death of modernity and the end of utopia, causing a retheorization of utopia, especially at the end of the 20th century, marked by the fall of communism and its architectural projects. Today’s urban and landscape design cannot ignore the retheorization of utopia, especially in postcommunist countries, modeled by social and urban engineering of communist ideology (utopia).*

Key words: architecture, urban space, landscape, urban design, utopia, the history of utopia

Rezumat. *Lucrarea investighează tema peisajului urban și apropierea acestuia de descrierile oferite în utopiile literaturii universale. Clarificarea opoziției „vizionar”/„utopic” necesită recuperarea și reconsiderarea sensurilor originare ale spațiului utopic, așa cum sunt ele fixate de textele literare sau programatice, centrate pe ideea de reformă socială și urbană, începând chiar cu Utopia lui Morus. Arhitecții s-au confruntat mereu cu utopia, având de ales între a accepta sau nu forțele ideologice ale ei (economice, politice, sociale). Această confruntare a dus la speculații interpretative care au catalizat discursul arhitectonic și designul, în anii ’70 existând numeroși teoreticieni care au declarat moartea modernității și sfârșitul utopiei, provocând o re-teoretizare a utopiei, în special la sfârșitul secolului XX, marcat de căderea comunismului și a proiectelor sale arhitectonice. Proiectarea urbană și peisagistica secolului XIX nu poate face abstracție de re-teoretizarea utopiei, mai ales în țările postcomuniste, modelate de ingineria socială și urbanistică a ideologiei (utopiei) comuniste.*

Cuvinte cheie: arhitectură, spațiu urban, peisagistic, proiectare urbană, utopie, istoria utopiei

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INTRODUCTION

Following the most present-day utopian studies it is difficult to find an author who wrote positively on Utopia in contemporary urban literature. As far as “utopia” is defined and understood as a code word synonymous with totalitarianism or Communism (or Stalinism, according to Fredric Jameson), the contemporary approaches on relations between urban landscape and utopian thinking are highly negatively influenced. Today’s urban and landscape design cannot ignore the retheorization of utopia.

For Manfredo Tafuri, the main challenge of the contemporary architecture is the return “to *pure architecture*, to form without utopia” (Tafuri, 1976). Tafuri observed that “The decline of the social utopia sanctioned ideology’s surrender to the *politics of things* brought about by the laws of profit. Architectural, artistic and urban ideology was left with the utopia of form as a way of recovering the human totality of through an ideal synthesis, as a way of embracing disorder through order” (Tafuri, 1976).

Also Fredric Jameson pointed out very clearly: “What we have perhaps not yet sufficiently emphasized is the relationship of this seemingly political crisis of Utopia (generally attributed to the fall of the communist parties and their substitution by the new social movements and anarchist currents) to a more general crisis of representation attributed to the advent of postmodernity” (Jameson, 2005). It is a perspective we largely met: the broad consensus is that all utopian experiments generally failed, and today there is no place to discover. The crisis of utopia could be interpreted as the result of the evolution of time. Still, as Antoine Picon observed, the relevance of a utopian approach for urban planning is valid, because the contribution of a utopian project is the identification of social meanings that possess imaginary potential.

According to Françoise Choay, the city was replaced by *the idea of city*, following three main paradigms: progressive, cultural and naturalist. All these models were “rationalistic and utopian, having a corrosive influence upon the urban structures” (Choay, 2002). The urban landscape promoted by this kind of approach was impossible to be generalised, as they were incapable to get with touch in the elementary functions of people. But urbanism should abandon models and functionalism, as “the new urbanist language would lose its specific for acceding a new and superior plan of generality; it would draw the whole society, indirectly implying it by referring to the framework of all significant systems” (Choay, 2002)

Also, Choay’s idea should be adopted in reassessing the role of the utopian writings in the urban planning: utopians were the first planners and urban planning is derived from the work of utopians. The return to utopia is necessary in discussing the new functions of utopia in contemporary urban landscapedesign.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Projects of ideal cities are to be found in the entire history of architecture. Some projects have been materialized, but most of them belong to an imagined reality. For this reason, ideal cities were considered perfect examples of failures or models of unsuccessful planning. Mentioning some examples reveals that the concept of ideal city goes beyond utopia.

Sforzinda is an ideal city designed between 1457-1464 by Filarete (Antonio di Pietro Averlino) that was never built, and was named after Francesco Sforza, the duke of Milan. The shape is iconographic, having a basic layout of eight equidistant points, created by overlaying two squares. All the avenues from the gates and towers converged in a central square. Actually, three squares were imagined: one for the prince's palace, one for the cathedral, and one for the market. Specifically designed was also the House of Vices and Virtues, as a materialisation of one favourite theme of treatises on moral in that time. *Sforzinda* embodies the absolutist social ideal in which one ruler holds all the power.

Octagon City near Humboldt (Kansas, USA) was designed by Henry Clubb in 1856, on the expenses of The Vegetarian Kansas Emigration Company for vegetarian people. Clubb, a vegetarian activist himself, imagined that eight roads would lead away from a central octagonal town square. From there, the city would be made up of four octagon villages, complete with octagon farmhouses, town squares, and public buildings. The settlers who stayed faced a multitude of problems, including lack of water when the local spring dried up and diseases. Nothing remained of the town today, but Clubb's legacy lives on in several octagon houses that remain in the US and Canada.

Garden City was invented by Ebenezer Howard in 1902, when he proposed in his treatise *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* a (new) vision of urban development. Howard imagined a series of ideal towns, planned on a concentric model and combining nature with society, as 'Town and Country must be married, and out of this joyous union will spring a new hope, a new life, a new civilization'. (Howard, 2003) Ebenezer Howard has initiated with this proposal the *garden city movement* in England, as a method of urban planning that imagined garden cities, that were intended to be planned, self-contained communities surrounded by "greenbelts", containing proportionate areas of residences, industry, and agriculture. Ebenezer Howard intended to found this community with a special feature regarding the property: every inhabitant was to be a shareholder.

Broadacre City was presented by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1932 (Wright, 1932). The model was initially displayed at an Industrial Arts Exposition in the Forum at the Rockefeller Center starting on April 15, 1935. Wright's imagined ideal community was a complete rejection of the American cities of the first half of the 20th century. According to him, cities would no longer be centralized and no longer beholden to the pedestrian or the central business district. *Broadacre City* was a thought experiment and also a serious proposal – one where the automobile would reign supreme. The key to Wright's "utopia" represented the tremendous technological advances made at the beginning of the 20th century, especially the automobile.

Le Corbusier's plan for *Ville Radieuse* was presented in 1930s, but the city has never become a reality. Le Corbusier's proposal unifies his visions of modern town construction and elements of residential building. Hence, the architect dealt with architectural and construction as well as with social image of the city. "If the city were

to become a human city, it would be a city without classes", affirmed Le Corbusier and for that reason he designed a pyramid of natural social orders (Le Corbusier, 1964)

Ville Radieuse alters the idea of the city-as-body: the city map still consists of a classical body with its head (business centre) and its heart (cultural centre). Though, the central axes are not bilaterally symmetrically applied. The plainness of the complex is seen as a biological development - like the roots of a tree. As a result, the city only consists of one central axe.

Many of its principles went on to influence modern planning: Le Corbusier himself designed Chandigarh in India (1949) and Lucio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer designed together with landscape designer Roberto Burle Marx between 1956-1960 Brasilia, the new Capital of Brazil.

Communism is characterised by a mixture of architectural tendencies: *Constructivist architecture*, a form of modern architecture (1920s-1930s) with Communist social purpose and *Stalinist architecture* or *Socialist classicism* (1933-1955), which was a part of the Soviet policy of rationalization of the country. All cities were built to a general development plan. Each was divided into districts, with allotments based on the city's geography. Projects would be designed for whole districts, visibly transforming a city's architectural image.

The post-Stalinist architecture lasted until the last years of Communism, and its legacy can be traced in all former Eastern Communist countries. Being connected with the idea of a society without classes, which remains a utopian concept, the architecture of the Communist age is often defined also as utopian.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Differentiating between "utopian" and "visionary" should lead us to underline the main feature of utopian: "utopian" is a particular form of "ideal". In the history of utopian thinking and also in the history of architecture the alternative and synonymic usage of these two terms is relevantly frequent, as suggest a confusion. "Utopian" is originally related to utopian thinking and writing, directly derived from Thomas Morus' *Utopia* (1516): the place of nowhere – not necessary in future, but in present. "Visionary" is related to an imagined future, to projections of the future – could be one of the features of social utopias. The negativity of utopia in present-day discourses is influenced by the idea of the impossibility of the ideal city: "An ideal city doesn't exist" (Governour, 2011). The rejection of utopia is a consequence of the rejection of the idea of ideal city – linked with that of ideal society (Plato's original idea of ideal society is stated in *Republic*, 380 BC). As the concept of ideal city precedes utopian writings, we may affirm that "utopian" is a version of "ideal". Urban planning and landscape architecture should not be imagined without reflecting to the imaginary environments of a wide variety of fascinating and often controversial movements and figures, including Plato, Filarete, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas More, Thomas Jefferson, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, Charles Fourier, Etienne Cabet, Robert Owen, William Morris, Ebenezer Howard, Bruno Taut, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, the European Situationists, the Japanese Metabolists, Archigram, Superstudio and many more, as Ruth Eaton claims. Although the ideal city belongs for the most part in the virtual domain of ideas,

Eaton explores the ability of ideal cities to stimulate reflection and change, and suggests under what conditions they might continue to exercise their vital function in relation to the urban environment of the future. The main suggestion is to recall together what Oscar Wilde affirmed: “a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at” (Wilde, 1900)

The original source of the inspiration in what history named utopian architecture and urban development is undoubtedly Thomas More's *Utopia*. Here we are not interested necessarily in the political project, but in urban project derived from the political idea of an ideal, perfect landscape planning. This political idea implied a society without private property, equality and conformism: “Long unbroken rows of houses face each other down the whole block. The housefronts along each block are separated by a street twenty feet wide. Behind the houses a large garden - as long on each side as the block itself is hemmed in all sides by the backs of the houses. Every house has a front door to the street and a back door to the garden. The double doors, which is open easily with a push of the hand and close again automatically, let anyone come in - so there is nothing private anywhere. [...] The Utopians are very fond of these gardens of theirs. They keep interested in gardening, partly because they delight in it, and also because of the competition among the blocks, which challenge one another to produce the best gardens. [...] And from the fact it appears that the city's founder must have made such gardens a primary object of this consideration.” (More, 2002)

“Utopian” and “ideal” may be opposed to reality, outside of reality, but they still provide suggestions and solutions in urban planning and landscape architecture.

As Tafuri observed, the crisis of modern architecture begins when the large industrial capital (its natural receiver) goes beyond ideology: the architectural ideology has no any purpose. This diagnosis could be extrapolated to the Post-Communist societies, after the fall of the Communist regimes, where there are no more coherent ideas of urban planning. It must be admitted that modern urbanism, including the Communist developments, has not been able to realize its models, in spite of being related with a utopian attempt to preserve a form for the city or to preserve a principle of form within the dynamics of urban structures.

We may affirm that only a return to architectural and super-technological “utopianism” could revive the new urban ideology. Technology and nature would play the role of the main catalyst, as they provide a synthesis of new languages and urban reality.

CONCLUSIONS

Having in mind this controversial history of the urban planning and urban landscape, strongly connected with utopian projections – and for this reason rejected after the fall of Communism –, we should take into account some fundamental clarifications made by Ruth Levitas. In *The Concept of Utopia*

(1990) and *Utopia as Method* (2013), Levitas insisted that the function of utopia is not escape, compensation or a description of a plan for the future. Utopia should be understood as a method for the imaginary reconstruction of society, as it is mostly an explanatory and educative tool. In order to have a contextual understanding, we should keep in mind that utopia is a framework for utopias.

As the ideal cities and utopian cities were considered situated in no-place, nowhere in reality, they were refuted, and their convergence with the future evolution of the urban planning is truly limited. But the return to the original sources of utopian representation of the ideal city is legitimate, as provides clarifications and delimitations that are very useful for the present-day architecture.

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