Utopia, the Origins and Invention of Western Urban Design

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What are we doing with utopia? The ideas I am going to share with you relate to what urban designers have done with utopia, which is based on the historical relationship that grew up between utopian thinking and the intent to organize and control the arrangement of space and thus manage society in order to ensure its development.

Introduction: the virtues of utopia

The place that exists nowhere proclaims the possibility of a looking-glass world and denies the legitimacy of the world the right way round. Between consciousness and reality develops a to-and-fro relationship develops: reality determines a consciousness that in turn determines realities through discourse, images and audiences. So fantasy may generate a project, the project may generate strategies and plans to realize it, and all this may generate a discourse representing reality that itself becomes real. And what if the imagination, dreams, revealed a reality that was more than real, a 'hyper-reality'.

We know that utopian discourse, unlike ideology, has revolutionary potential and as such is interesting from the perspective of social change, and particularly urban social change. Utopia related to the specific area of urban planning is based on the fact that the origins of the discipline were profoundly influenced by the ideal city and utopian discourse. So let us approach the relationship between utopia and urban design from two fundamental questions:
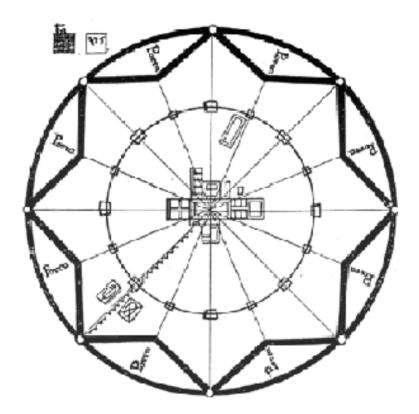
- How does the city impart its morphology to utopian discourse?
- Can urban design be the science of the ideal city?

The ideal city as a form of utopia

However paradoxical it may seem, utopian thinking sees the city both as the dynamic product of a complex relationship and as an abstract notion. Like any ideal phenomenon the representation of the city escapes with difficulty from metaphorical transference, as well as anthropomorphic reification or modelling of the spatial order. Symbolically the structure of built space may formalize dreams that regulate the passions and make them subject to reason (G. Jean). But at its philosophical roots in the ideal representation of the city, the myth of eternal origin is its universal principle that has given meaning, with or without reason, to the urban model.

Renaissance thought conceptualized the city as an intellectual, objectivizable object, constructing it rationally, thanks to the invention of perspective (Brunelleschi, *c*. 1413). With the philosophy of illustration, due to the new method of projection and the development of descriptive geometry, the possibility was enhanced of

Antonio Averulino, known as Filarete, develops in his 25–volume *Trattato d'Architettura* (1461–4), a vision of the new, ideal city (called the Sforzinda) with the first symmetrical urban layout of the modern era.

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representing space graphically in images of cities that for the first time could match descriptions, regardless of whether they were real or ideal. Thus the ideal city put into practice the rational transformations of utopia.
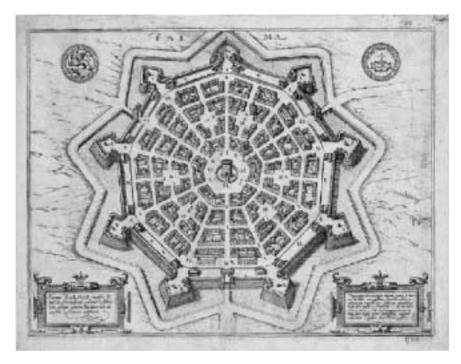
G. Simmel is supposed to have said that 'there is no utopia without a design of a utopian space'. One of the chief features I will consider is that utopia brings together the project of society and a spatial mechanism. Then the contribution of the ideal city may be approached by considering integrations and separations between space and society, between the physical form of built space and social relations or, more precisely, between the arrangement of space and the organization of the society that inhabits it. Analysing these interactions has been a constant concern for town planners, who adopt three main stances:

- Space and society interact in a way that is at least independent, if not irrelevant.
- The links between urban design programmes and development of economic, political, cultural and social relations occur in parallel but cannot be analysed together.
- Space and society influence each other. Without having a clear awareness of which predominates, the most common 'answer' has been to attribute a therapeutic function to space. (The most famous case is Jeremy Bentham's 'panoptism', and his 1787 'Panopticon' proposes a mechanism for controlling, correcting and normalizing under supervision the behaviour of social groups.)[1]

Though Plato[2] and Aristotle[3] developed *avant la lettre* a different utopian urban discourse, I must mention them here for two reasons. First, and as recent authors have already proved, both of them have had a great influence on the representation of the city as the basis for the ideal society. Second, their intention is not to outline a project capable of being built but to found a political practice that is essentially urban. Thus both of them set out political and spatial structures that are, as well as pedagogical explanations of an ethical theory, methodological illustrations that enable thought to be translated more easily into space.

We should remember that for Plato political and spatial orders are interrelated since both are the manifestation of 'universal unity': the city is a transcendent entity, its structure is given *a priori* because of numerical relationships, as a linking element between political, social and spatial organization, just as the demiurge carried out the configuration of the world. This geometric predetermination of society, via the city, has resulted in the fact that many urban projects are more like speeches than constructions in stone.[4]

As for More's *Utopia*, it sets out a model of a counter-society whose attainment is conditioned by space, and it identifies spatial features whose position is not specified but is reproducible. Utopus left the Utopians the complete plan of the city so that no later intervention would change the basic structure, and so that in this way the opportunity to feel at home in any location would be guaranteed. Thus utopia stresses the principle of the prototype over the evolving space. F. Choay's writings have analysed in detail the textual genre invented by More and the characteristics of *Utopia* as a 'founding text' (*texte instaurateur*).[5] For the purposes of this paper I shall review three of these characteristics:

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Palmanova, one of the ideal-type cities of the Renaissance, built 1593–1608 near Venice, probably by the military architect Giulio Savorgnano. From Georg Braun and Frans Hogenberg's atlas *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, Vol. V, Cologne (1598). Copyright © Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

- the model society is 'elsewhere', beyond our space and time, so it eludes limits on duration or change;
- this model of society is based on a model space;
- the model space controls and is controlled.

Thus modelling of space ensures reproduction of social practices without allowing the specificity of individual needs or aspirations, attributing to itself a therapeutic or magical role. Again according to Choay, this is a new idea which distinguishes More from all previous designers of ideal cities and societies. The efficacy thus attributed to built space, transformed into a tool or mechanism, is once more integrated into the Renaissance epistemological context. If Amaurot is more discourse than city, the critical modelling of space which it describes became the chosen tool of social reformers, some of whose projects were developed and applied concretely, almost all of them unsuccessfully.

So we can conclude the first section by saying that the relationship between the ideal city and utopian discourse develops on the basis of three fundamental principles:

(a)   In utopia, government of people comes about through governing things.

(a)   Society is conditioned by space. The model uses the spatial mechanism that technically and therapeutically ensures realization of the model (spatial arrangement of streets, squares, areas, borders and walls).

(c)   The proposal for a spatial model may also work as a methodological artifice that makes it easier to set out a social and political problem, claiming that the solution lies in built space.

These observations highlight the importance of constructing spatial mechanisms, an objective that underlies the project of the theory of urban design. The ideal city and urban utopias have the following main features:

- Their aim is social harmony through a strict spatial order (ruling out whims).
- They are the detailed description of a political space based on a geometrical construction, making explicit relationships between spaces and the functioning of society.
- They are geographically isolated (on islands, in places that are cut off and sheltered, like Fourier's Phalanstery situated in the depths of the country, or Icara deep in the mountains).
- They obey a strict orthogonal order (the right angle, essential to subdue chaos).
- Their built space orders, controls, is specialized and ensures functioning.[6]
- They work because of the ability of technology and their experts to correct 'errors'.

Can urban planning be the science of the ideal city?

On the basis of utopian thinking there then developed the hope that town and social planning could adopt common approaches. When we talk very schematically about the set of theories on urban planning, we can consider two aspects: one that links ideas about society and civilization (according to the tradition of Simmel or Spengler), and one that focuses on technical qualities, which is the more common nowadays.

From writers on urban planning we know that up to the Renaissance the intention to organize built space scientifically had not been the object of study for any autonomous discipline. Traditionally town planning had in fact been the result of areas of activity outside the scope of technico-scientific supervision. To cite only three of these, and following Benevolo, there are certain social practices, such as the law and religion, the overambitiousness of politicians and the 'city types', that have been inventing and re-inventing themselves all through history.

Theoretical urban planning arrived with the Industrial Revolution. In 1867 the engineer Cerdá (*Teoría general de la urbanización*) invented the specific genre of writing that can be considered as town planning theory and which persists to this day.[7] There were three principal influences: the utopian tradition, the scientific positivism of the period and some projects for 'new towns'.[8] That kind of town planning had three aims: scientific validity, universal rationality and political neutrality.[9] However, from the start it had close links with the leading middle-class groups, which demanded that it should prevent the advance of socialism.

Thus urban planning theory was based on the possibility of a normative science of building bringing together the set of scientific propositions deduced from analysis of urban construction, and with a focus that was more instrumental, technical and operational than creative. Its chief characteristics are very reminiscent of those of the ideal city and utopia (see F. Choay):

- It sees itself as a scientific discourse.
- It contrasts two images of the city: a negative one, with its defects and disorder, and a positive one, with its proposal for order.
- The new city is a spatial model.
- The space controls and is controlled through scientific rigour.

The rational method adopted by urban planning theory to imagine the organization of space and put it into practice makes two basic assumptions which we might highlight. The first is that the urban object is a technical object that has its origins, as I have already mentioned as regards the ideal city, in the discovery of perspective and descriptive geometry, which resulted, on the one hand, in the objectivization of space, and on the other, in the use of the plan as the operational tool of town planning method. The second assumption is once again the spatial model as the universally valid mechanism that enables it to carry out its function.

From among our initial considerations, let us look again at these two assumptions. The construction of perspective and the importance of subjective observation were in their time two revolutionary elements in the representation of the world, of national territory and in the attempt to plan control of its future development. For its part the therapeutic character attributed to built space, mainly from the 18th century onwards, together with urban planning's theoretical project and in direct relation with utopian discourse, consolidated the practical possibility of influencing the course of history and easing the transition to a better society. From Plato's representation of the ideal city and from utopia, the spatial model has been for urban planning a factor that is never neutral and is likely to ensure institutions' status quo. Indeed, More gave space the task of safeguarding and perpetuating institutions, taking from Plato's *Laws* a relationship between space and society that was facilitated by the spatial model. The difference is that for Plato the spatial model means a return to the myth of lost order, whereas for More, on the other hand, it has the symbolic function of promoting a new order.

This is how town planning imposes the process of spatial modelling as the basis for urban policies and organizational plans. Design and organization of space assume certain values that are dependent on cultural contexts, complex political and economic conditions and ethical choices. Nonetheless, these axiological principles are not explicitly acknowledged by their authors, who employ an ideological discourse distanced from the claimed scientific field and reduced to the normative.

From the 1960s the scientific status and the quality of urban design theory have been abundantly discussed, principally by aesthetic criticism, the social and human sciences and epistemology. Today it would be necessary to supplement that criticism with a criticism of morphological nature that would review the work already carried out on architectural manuals[10] in order to retrieve neglected values, such as those of desire, pleasure, beauty and hope. A critical apparatus thus constituted could sup-

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port the effort to demystify and assess the epistemological status of urban planning, its scientific robustness and the universality of its principles.

Conclusions

We have seen that the building up of knowledge about western urban design is directly transmitted by the history of thought, its cultural revolutions and technical and social changes. The discursive figure of Utopia and in particular More's seminal text provide the basic elements forming the epistemological project of the new discipline which was born towards the end of the 19th century and extensively practised during the 20th. Thanks to utopia, urban planning has been associated since its prehistory with imaginative–creative and social elements. It is through this discursive figure that we can go back as far as Plato, and in parallel run through the history of the representation of the ideal city in order to discover the essential elements composing it.

And we need to ask ourselves, as the first point in these conclusions, whether the nature that is best suited to the urban theory project is technology, philosophy or some other that, of necessity, has a specific focus, or rather, whether the urban phenomenon does not require a cross-disciplinary treatment that matches its complexity.

The new discipline of the 19th century that claimed to organize the city and its future thus maintained its Platonic allegiance to the need for an *a priori* essence, inventing and occasionally constructing the perfect model. This raised up the urban form as a model of society. If modelling became the basic focus of town planning, this occurred for two different reasons:

- the transcendental ability attributed to space as the regulator of social change;
- its objectivization thanks to perspective and the rationalist tradition of modernism.

Two important questions arise: the city is a social institution and a political entity whose construction (that of the *polis*, a self-run community aiming to achieve the common good via self-sufficiency) cannot be based on preconceived schemes. So there may not necessarily be a 'natural' relationship between political and spatial order. In Aristotelian terms the ideal principle sought through modelling of space is independent of its formal characteristics, but it is reciprocal to the political[11] and, I would add, to the social. Thus the city is a process that is always becoming and will never reach a final state, which opens up the horizon to virtuality, the ability to think and dream a future that is forever dynamic and changing and in many respects depends on us.

Urban planning has not been able to resolve the contradiction between utopian metaphysics (see Gianni Vattimo's paper in this issue) and the objectivization/rationalization of built space. Post-metaphysical urban design is yet to be born.

If the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution mark breaks in the design and practice of town planning, the spatial organization of society is once again being shaken up in the 21st century by the new forms of mobility introduced by informa-

tion technologies. The 'knowledge society' will change the importance given to the control of space, incorporating parameters open to all possible adjustments that might free us from old technocratic beliefs to transform built space, its practices and representations.

One of the greatest challenges in current urban culture, based on the search for individual autonomy, is the development of conviviality and imagining other ways to live. The principle of hope that gives life to utopia, the dream of a different future, is a necessity for social change that we should recapture, especially in the field of urban design. Today, more than a century of practice shows that social contradictions cannot be resolved simply by playing with space, and that we would have much to gain by returning to the importance of citizenship and urbanity as components of urban design.

So the real work is still to be done. Programmes such as 'Paths of Thought' and other UNESCO programmes that help to produce critical knowledge give valuable support in continuing to demystify. And at the same time making suggestions, coming across obstacles and answers, discovering hopes and ways to make them come true, revealing intentions and possibilities is to understand and seek solutions to the complex phenomena we are faced with today.

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Notes

1. From the advent of 'public health' as an interventionist discipline the main criticisms of 'urban chaos' and the medieval city's 'irrationality' began to be formulated. Thenceforth the layout of roads was what directed the shape of the city.
2. Cf. especially *Republic*, *Timaeus*, *Critias* and *Laws*.
3. Cf. especially *Politics*.
4. On the subject of Magnesia, the city in the *Laws*, there is mention of 'building the city with words' (*Laws* III, 702d). This is very important with regard to architectural practice, since as a method it is related to the act of planning architecturally.
5. A discursive category like that of architectural manuals: 'We call founding texts those texts whose aim is to lay out an autonomous conceptual apparatus that makes it possible to conceive and realize new spaces' (from *stauros*, theoretical basis for space that is built or to be built; seminal with regard to the founding of cities). Again, according to Choay (1980) both More's *Utopia* and Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* are equivalent and paradigmatic texts from the formal, semantic point of view. However, they differ in their manner of proceeding with regard to the way they generate the built space: one using rules and the other a model.
6. Via the rules of hygiene and functional separation.
7. From its semantic origin the term contains a certain ambiguity because of the Spanish neologism *urbanización* (urban development). Cerdá called the new discipline this 'Science of the spatial organization of cities'. However *urbanismo* (town planning) is different from *urbanización* (habilitar para la residencia y las prácticas de la vida en sociedad: to equip for residence and the practicalities of life in society) which followed a path parallel to the rise of *urbanismo* (see Merlin and Choay, 1988).

8. Like the linear city of Soria (1890), E. Howard's garden cities (1902 and 1919), Le Corbusier's New Delhi (1911) or Canberra (1913). For the most part the practice continued rather as a few remodelling projects in European cities, chief among them being the paradigmatic project Haussman carried out in Paris (1853–69).

9. 'Deliberate intervention, organized by the political authority, in the built space, or that to be built, in order to distribute communities and their activities in an orderly fashion throughout a territory. This intervention, which may be legal, political, technical, ethical or scientific in nature, is determined by values, practices and the actors mobilized' (Merlin and Choay, 1988).

10. In order to review the importance of the site's specificities, the make-up of the place, its symbolic and cultural value, the needs and aspirations of its inhabitants and its aesthetic sensitivity.

11. The quality of governability (like those of self-sufficiency and homogeneity) is what makes the city. The citizens are the city's actors. Citizens are not those who live in the city but those who take part in the functions of government.

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