Emergence of a utopian vision of modernist and futuristic houses and cities in early 20th century

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Abstract. Throughout the development of literature on urban design theories, utopian thinking has played a crucial role as utopians were among the first designers. Many unrealized utopian projects such as The Radiant City, have presented a research laboratory and positive attempts for all architects, urban designers and theorists. In this essay, a utopian vision following under More’s and Jameson’s definitions is discussed, examining how the utopian vision of modernist and futuristic houses and cities emerged in the early twentieth century in response to several factors, what urban utopia aimed to represent, and how such version was represented in the built form and the urban landscapes.

1. Definition of Utopia: A Brief Overview

Following Ganjavie’s article, it is difficult to find a unified definition of utopia.[1] The name of the entire genre is More’s utopia where the term ‘utopia’ can be used to signify any works that are seemingly idyllic and fictional [2]. In general, “utopian has come to be a code word on the left for socialism or communism; while on the right it has become synonymous with ‘totalitarianism’ or, in effect, with Stalinism”.[3] However, when reviewing twentieth century articles in the field of urban design and architecture, describe some shortcomings of More’s utopia such as it is failure to correspond to the contemporary society. Therefore, throughout the twentieth century, many architects and urban designers put forward their ideas for utopian cities such as Howard, Wright and Le Corbusier. [4]

2. Factors Influencing the Emergence of a Utopian Vision

There are three major factors that motivated the emergence of a utopian vision of modernist/futurist houses and cities, including futurist movements, urbanization and population growth and social background.

Specifically, the publication of The Funding and Manifestos of Futurism in 1909 represents emergence of Futurism. On one hand, this manifesto eulogizes contemporary industrial civilization and scientific techniques totally changed the perception of conventional time and space. On the other hand, this manifesto derogates all the old transitions, supports sweeping all the cultural legacy from ancient Rome and advocates demolition of all museums, libraries and colleges. Marinetti argues that ‘the world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed…’ [5] Sant’Elia also articulates his Futurist interpretation of modernity in his manifesto in 1914, claiming that conventional materials are supposed to be replaced by structure of machines and new materials. But Sant’Elia argues that the urban layout should be built corresponding to population-centralization and efficient transportation including underground rails, stereo-crossing road web and moving pavements. [6] Moreover, steel, glass and textile fibre should substitute wood, stone and brick to enable residents to get maximum lightness and elasticity. As the influence of Futurist movements, many of their ideas were
translated and expressed in architecture and urban designs such as Città Nuova (New City) with machine-like shape created by Antonio Sant’Elia.

In addition, urbanization and increases in population are another substantial factor. During the period of late nineteenth century to early twentieth century, the population of London grew from 900,000 to 4.5 million. The population of Paris increased from 500,000 to 2.5 million over the same period. Berlin’s population went from 190,000 to more than 2 million and New York’s from 60,000 to 3.4 million. Such fast population growth necessitated reinventions of these cities to respond to the increased number of urban inhabitants as the cities lost their power to control. Many utopian urban projects at that time emerged such as Le Corbusier’s Ville Contemporaine- a city of 3 million inhabitants in 1922 and Wright’s Broadacre City.

The third factor driving the formation of utopian vision is the social context. Utopian urban projects are formed gradually and naturally when reality no longer solves new problems happening in cities. Le Corbusier saw around cities stagnation in the countryside, a crisis in the old regional centres, blind forces of chance and profit and class segregation. He proposed a new urban system- The Contemporary City. This new urban design included high-density living places to solve the problem of congested city, such innovation as separation of the pedestrian circulation paths from the roadways to create more efficient urban transport system. Therefore, on the one hand, impulses of utopia provide a critique of existing social order structure; on the other hand, social background or crisis influences the emergence of utopia.

3. Aspects Represented by Utopian Thinking

Three major factors motivated the emergence of a utopian vision of modernist/futurist houses and cities, including futurist movements, urbanization and population growth and social background.

If human beings still desire to live in better cities, and for the role of architecture to be sustainable and more just, then utopian approaches to architecture will be used so that planners can begin to figure out new possibilities for human life. Therefore, utopia aims to secure the need to dream, the need for mystery, and sometimes even impulses to create poetry and to construct. Humans are able to realize the world they are living in is in dynamic state of progress rather than constancy through utopian urban projects. With a utopian approach, habitual values are thrown into disarray and utopia’s proper and newfound space can be easily entered with an opportunity to educate humans themselves.

Utopia also aims to summon aspiration- to desire more, to dream more and even to dream in new ways. As Satuffer argues, Utopia always presents cities in positive ways and plays an important role in urban planning. However, when cities need to progress, utopia appears to be a viable approach as utopians throughout ages were responding to problems that cities were facing and were able to offer a compelling alternative for their citizens.

In addition, utopia aims to represent ideal types of cities for the future. They are “convenient and attractive intellectual tools that enable each planner to bring together his many innovations in design, and to show them as part of a coherent whole, a total redefinition of the idea of the city”. For instance, entering into a new century, Paris’s urbanization accelerated continuously under the impetus of Industrial Revolution and a great number of dwellings flock into gathering areas. Governments intended to seek a new urban design solving social problems. The Plan Voisin was a solution for the centre of Paris designed by Le Corbusier including buildings are in a regular grid, the space structured with two new traffic arterial roads through city and skyscrapers rise in the heart. Even though this utopian idea was not accepted by governments, it offered a good beginning and new possibilities for reconstructing Paris.

According to Ganjavie, some attributes of contemporary cities are production of utopian thinking. “The separation of pedestrians from automobiles (Cabet, Garnier, & Hénard), the separation of urban functions, zoning (Garnier), and the generalization of prefabricated systems (Le Corbusier) are just some examples generated by utopian thinkers.” In this case, utopia creates new possibilities to improve citizens’ living standards and also meets human desires and needs with development of society.
4. Epitomisation of a Utopian Vision in Built Environment and Urban Landscape

This section contends that a utopian vision of modernist/futuristic houses and cities somehow is epitomised in built form and urban landscape, but it is not completely embodied due to social, political and other factors.

It is believed that the quality of utopia has been fully expressed in Archizoom’s famous project – the No-Stop City – that is an urban presentation of a factory-like building. For Archizoom, this urban project is completely realized in a capitalist city. “The dark images of the No-Stop City have been used as a model to create shock in readers in order to let citizens think about the gaps in a capitalist society”.[9]

There are another examples demonstrating that utopian thinking is epitomised in the built form. Mies van der Rohe proposed ‘less is more’, which means using less materials to show more things in buildings. Bourgeois's House and Terraced House designed by Jacobus Oud and Victor Bourgeois respectively are two of masterpieces in the Deutscher Werkbund exhibition of 1927. Both projects reflect ideals of Werkbund, and in particular, they reveal an aesthetic of function, tectonics, and lightness; the most important point here is that an architecture expressing less is more really is a discourse on beauty.[10] Mies van der Rohe's Tugendhat House in Brno “as an ideal realisation of a new overall conceptualisation not only of architectural space but of living itself” shows weightless living and Mies’ design principle of ‘less is more’ and emphasizes on functional amenities.[14]

More examples still can be found. For example, just as Manifesto of Futurist Architecture 1914 claims that “roofs and underground spaces must be used” [6], Le Corbusier’s Five Points of New Architecture proposes free ground design and roof garden, which means ground floor with diverse internal usage is totally released from supporting walls, and a flat roof can be utilized for planting flowers while the whole building would be green. The urban planning of Chandigarh is also based on Le Corbusier’s Ville Radieuse.

Nevertheless, Ganjavie believes that the broad conclusion is that all the utopian experiments have generally failed as there is a lack of enthusiasm toward understanding the relationship between utopian thinking and urban design. [9] There is a significant evidence leading readers to believe that the utopian approach to urban design should be seen as an old and dead concept. As Pinder argues, even though utopian thinking has been proclaimed many times throughout history, it always seems like fantasy. [11] Paden also argues that utopia is one human beliefs and this belief can be thought of as neglecting limitations of natural conditions to create ideal (or utopian) cities and societies. [13] What is more, Jacobs in her famous book The Death and Life of Great American Cities mentions that all utopian projects are realized arise under particular conditions; in other words, they are under utopian conditions avoiding from reality to create imaginary world. [16] Therefore, utopian projects no matter urban design or architecture, cannot be completely implemented in contemporary cities.

5. Conclusion

By referencing and analysing actual designs and utopian theories, this essay argues that a utopian vision of modernist/futuristic houses and cities emerged in the early twentieth century in response to political, economic, social, technological and cultural forces and futurism movement. Generally, a utopian vision aimed to represent the power of contemporary technology, new aesthetic conception, spiritual pursuit and human desires and needs. No-Stop City project, villa designs on Deutscher Werkbund exhibition of 1927 and some other examples given above exemplify utopia can be somehow realized. However, utopianism cannot be fully realized due to natural conditions and reality of contemporary cities. Just as Ganjavie argues, with the use of a utopia approach in urban planning and architecture, “our habitual values are thrown into disarray, and we enter utopia’s proper and newfound space with an opportunity to educate ourselves”. [9] The way that human beings did for approaching utopia essentially is a process of self-improvement.

Nevertheless, for urban design or planning projects working toward the betterment of human conditions, urban designers or planners alike may need to go beyond the aspire for pure spiritual life and keep away from out-of-tune talks in the name of culture, politics and economy. For a soul that dwells on unmeaningful fantasy and searches for utopian wishes, those refined temperament things, more often than not, would go the wrong way though they sometimes did generate certain relief and success. In this
sense, urban designers/planners cannot neglect conditions of the real society that may depend on factors beyond the spiritual ballast and aspiration.

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