Chapter 12

Construction sites of utopia

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Utopias are pieces of literature that present new social totalities, with new political and economic institutions, new habits, new tastes, new labour conditions and – always – a new space. My question is, very simply: How would these utopian spaces have been produced?

Most utopian writers do not explain this, concentrating on issues which they perceive in their own societies and from their own social position. As these authors are seldom building workers or familiar with construction sites, they do not worry much about them, or about the inner coherence between the production of utopian spaces and utopian labour arrangements. But we can derive the construction sites of a utopia from the few hints provided in the texts, the decisive general features (the built environment itself, the political structure, the division of labour, ownership and technology, for example), the context in which the utopia was written, and other references used by the author.

Why engage in such a tricky task? This idea first arose as a sort of marketing strategy for a critical theory of architecture, because architects (and students) enjoy discussing utopias, preferring to avoid discussion of building work and its social conflicts. Utopias are appealing to architects because, in one way or another, architects aim to create spaces in which life would be better than before (even if only a by a bit). In contrast, construction sites tend to appear in the architectural field only as a means to this noble end. Reflecting upon construction destroys architectural illusions, because it shows that even the best plan is a device for the conventional domination of labour, and that we, as designers, are responsible for this device. Most designs could never have been
conceived, let alone carried out, under relations of production other than capitalism. Utopias magnify this crucial but largely obscured contradiction. Looking at their construction sites may get us used to envisioning not only how nice life could be once a building is ready, but also how life would be in the course of its material production.

The following presents this approach to utopias through commentary on just three of them: Thomas More’s *Utopia*, written at the beginning of the modern era, and the utopias of Edward Bellamy and William Morris produced at the end of the (second) industrial revolution. I will briefly indicate some general aspects of these utopian societies, spaces, their solutions for labour, and their construction sites.

We may assume that these utopian construction sites are intended to perform somewhat lasting transformations on their material surroundings, thus requiring a considerable amount of work. In the real world this has almost always implied arduous physical labour, together with domination. Utopias can resort to a few basic schemes to solve this question (whether or not they address it directly). First, they can criticise heavy labour or the drudgery that causes bodily pain and social contempt. A simpler lifestyle, fair allocation of labour among all society members, shorter working hours, cooperation, or improved technologies are ways to relieve such a burden. A utopia can also concentrate on the critique of alienated labour, or the meaningless activity that disqualifies and isolates workers, labour that is done without any pleasure, only for the sake of an abstract exchange value. In this case, the answer is emancipation of labour (from capital, the state or any other oppressive relation), so that workers can themselves determine the means and ends of their working process. Still another possibility is to criticise labour as such, or the ideology of work as the only way to personal fulfilment and social recognition. The abolition of labour, due to improved machines, a benevolent nature or some other marvel would be the prospect in this case.

More’s *Utopia*

A truly golden little book, no less beneficial than entertaining, of a republic’s best state and of the new island Utopia was published by Thomas More in 1516, in the context of an ascending merchant capitalism in Europe, enclosure of the commons in England, poverty, hunger, crises in crop production, unemployed soldiers (after the War of the Roses), humanist scholars, and the promise of the newly ‘discovered’ continent. More himself was in a delicate political position, as a Master of Requests and Privy Councillor. We can never be sure which aspects of his text were intended as ideal images, criticism, satire or simply as jokes, beginning with the name *U-topia* (suggesting both ‘no-place’ and ‘happy-place’).

More’s protagonist is a Portuguese travelling intellectual named Hythlodaeus (which means ‘non-sense’). The Utopian society appears to Hythlodaeus as a happy Spartan monastery. There is no private ownership, no money, and no poverty. Reading and humanist studies are widespread. Everybody follows the same time schedule and uses the same outfit, and jewellery and other vanities are regarded as foolish. But the most important feature of this utopian society is the absence of any quantitative growth.
Population, economy, space, everything is stable and seems ready. There is almost no building activity besides preventive maintenance.

Utopia is a croissant-shaped island that equals Great Britain in size (Figure 12.1), and has a remarkable infrastructure of roads, bridges, fortifications, water supply, and fifty-four cities. They range from 70,000 to 140,000 inhabitants (equal to the population of London around 1500), and they all follow one and the same scheme, similar to a Roman colony, with four sectors, a regular grid, and a surrounding wall. But Utopia also has its own colonies on a nearby continent, which function as buffers against changes: when the population on the island increases, people move to the colonies; when it decreases, they return.

The burden of labour in Utopia is not too heavy because there are no idle classes or luxury goods and services. Agriculture is highly respected, and everyone works in it for at least two years, so that there is no social inequality between the city and the countryside. In addition, every Utopian applies him/herself to a specific craft. Six working hours a day is enough to produce plenty of everything needed for a simple life. Some unpleasant tasks are taken up as a sacrifice by a group of very religious people. The most degrading trade – butchery – is done by slaves (slavery substitutes for the death penalty, and is thus a ‘humanising’ measure). As for technological change, this is minor, based on common sense and careful resource management rather than on science.

But Utopia’s historical records suggest that it was not always such a quiet place. The island was originally a peninsula. A king named Utopos conquered the indigenous population, and immediately ordered the cutting of the isthmus. He is said to have forced the natives and also his own soldiers to labour, so that the former might not think that he treated them like slaves. Then he defined the above-mentioned infrastructure, including the description of the urban configuration.

In antiquity ‘cutting the isthmus’ was a proverbial expression for aiming at impossibilities, because many powerful rulers tried to cut a channel through the Isthmus of Corinth, always failing due to natural or supernatural causes. The episode shows how powerful Utopos must have been. But it also means that Utopia was founded as a kind of labour camp, the more so as its channel equals the English Channel in size, and its roads were probably built according to roman tradition, which was still the best standard in More’s time (Figure 12.2). More tries to convince us that all this building was done without violence. But considering that in Ancient Rome road building was used as a punishment, why should these natives submit to such heavy and tedious labour if not by coercion?

Between Utopia’s foundation as a labour camp and the republic’s best state of absolute stability, there must have been still another phase of transition. We might suppose that this was when Utopians built all their public buildings – each city has two hundred meeting halls, thirteen churches, four hospitals and some other facilities – and replaced their first wattle and daub shacks for the two-storied stone houses with beautiful collective gardens that Hythlodaeus gets to know. It is likely that the crafts related to building flourished at that time, and that the whole society supported them, so that it would not take too long to get everything ready. It may have been the most interesting period for those Utopians who do not fancy the monastic life.
Figure 12.1
Great Britain and the Island of Utopia, following the shape and size described by Thomas More. Drawing: courtesy Roberto Eustáquio dos Santos, 2015

Figure 12.2
Construction of Utopia's infrastructure following the Roman standard for roads, bridges and cities. Drawing: courtesy Roberto Eustáquio dos Santos, 2015
In summary, the material production of Utopia’s space is inconsistent with Utopia’s social order. Thomas More opposes heavy and despised labour, imagining a society in which labour would be relieved and well-respected, but he also imagines spaces that only hard dull work can provide – at least under the technological conditions he describes. Therefore construction must have taken place before the good life could begin, first in a long and brutal foundation period, followed by a better but still labour-intensive transition period. The Hippodamian plan of the cities illustrates this point: it symbolises equality and may indeed provide similar spatial conditions for all citizens after its completion, but the construction of a grid plan requires strict control, so that no differences are introduced spontaneously and no craftsperson is allowed to act at his or her own discretion.

Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*

Almost four centuries later, in 1888, Edward Bellamy published *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, which was to become a bestseller in the United States and abroad. Bellamy’s context is the city of Boston in a world of already ‘globalised’ industrial capitalism, urban expansion, financial crises, international labour movements, and violent repressions. Many people saw revolution as imminent, so that all sorts of competing proposals for a new social order were in debate: communism, socialism, anarchism, liberalism and conservatism, in every imaginable version.

The protagonist of *Looking Backward* is the rich and well-educated idler Julian West, who travels to the year 2000 by way of a hypnotic sleep of more than a century (a fire destroys his house but spares the secret cellar where he is sleeping). West finds a society that appears to be a hybrid of the military and Disneyland. Eventually he learns that, after a short and peaceful revolution at the end of the nineteenth century, ‘the Nation’ had become the sole owner of any former private property. As a central planning and management unit, the Nation guarantees total economic equality by means of a grant that every citizen receives on a kind of ‘credit card’ (which operates more like a debit card). Consumption is less conspicuous than it once was, but it still represents the better part of life, in contrast to production. In fact everybody seems to behave, think and feel like the middle class to which Bellamy himself belonged. For instance, everyone appreciates and supports music, literature and the fine arts, but as a consumer, whereas artistic production is reserved for professionals.

The utopian city of Boston has changed so much that Julian West hardly recognises it. Instead of pollution, slums, ugly buildings and ugly people, there are trees, parks and huge public buildings all over the place. According to Bellamy, these buildings are of a ‘magnificent architecture’, but his descriptions suggest that no new style has developed. Indeed they look just like the bourgeois parts of American and European cities in 1887 – symmetrical facades, axial entrances, monumental stairs, outer and inner surfaces solemnly decorated with sculptures, carvings, mosaics and murals. And Boston’s family homes are mostly conventional and unspectacular houses or flats, which the citizens rent from the Nation for an amount defined by size and location. As for the
modern factories and technical devices – such as automatic canopies to cover pavements when it rains or pneumatic tubes to deliver messages and wares almost instantly – these are rather concealed.

The labour question is solved in Bellamy’s utopia by an ‘industrial army’, which follows a military code of honour and obedience. Every citizen has to enlist at the age of twenty-one, when he or she finishes school. In the first three years of working life, young Bostonians must take the harder jobs. Later, they may choose. Thanks to a complex central system, subjective vocations match objective needs, and the sacrifices related to different occupations are equalised by shorter or longer working hours. Productivity increases constantly by means of new technology and overall rationalisation, which ranges from the labour process itself to efficient distribution and waste prevention. Even so, people do not really like their work; they do it because it is their duty as citizens, and because they know that at the age of forty-five they can retire and have fun for the rest of their lives. Only artists, physicians, priests, journalists and professors (but not architects) work individually or in autonomous guilds, and are not subject to the rules of the industrial army.

As for Boston’s construction sites, Bellamy assumes that the Nation decided not to put the new order in risk by building big projects immediately after the revolution. Instead, they began with housing reform, reallocating families to create equal dwelling conditions. The construction of infrastructure and the magnificent public buildings must have started later, when the new social order was already completely established. It is likely that new technical devices relieved many operations in the construction industry, and that labour processes were gradually re-engineered by scientific studies and management. After all, Bellamy was a contemporary of Fredrick Taylor and Frank Gilbreth. The latter’s motion studies in bricklaying, for instance, must have been brought to perfection in the year 2000, so that the bricklayers of the industrial army would work with machine-like efficiency. The monotony and tediousness produced by these rationalised operations in Boston remain hidden behind surface decoration, applied by professional artists.

The construction of Bellamy’s utopian space is part of his ideal social order. In contrast to More’s island, the renewal of the city of Boston is assumed to happen when the good life had already begun. The only problem is that, if art has anything to do with work and with freedom, there cannot be any art of building in this utopia. Architects are managers, and building workers are animated tools. The burden of labour is alleviated for the price of a deeper alienation. The abolition of labour could be achieved in this utopia if it were only a question of technological development. But it is not. Politically, freedom from labour is as unlikely as its emancipation, because there must always be real or invented necessities to keep people in check.

Morris’s News from Nowhere

William Morris’s News from Nowhere or an Epoch of Rest was published in 1890, two years after Bellamy’s book, as a critical response to Bellamy’s solutions to class struggle.
Figure 12.3
Boston in 1872 (after the fire that destroyed the darker area); and, below, Boston in 2000, as suggested in Looking Backward, with neoclassical public buildings, orderly arranged parks, and free of slums, smoke and the wasteful means of production and distribution that characterises a free market economy. Drawings by Charles Richard Parsons, 1872, and courtesy Roberto Eustáquio dos Santos, 2015.

and his view of socialism. News from Nowhere presents a unique utopia, because Morris, as an artist, craftsman, political activist, reader of Marx, and a theorist of art and labour, takes the material production of space as a key element for his utopian society, instead of just describing space as scenery. Thus News from Nowhere pictures a much more radical transformation than Bellamy had in mind. Nowhere's revolution took at least a century, and was anything but peaceful. In the process, people learned to feel, think and act differently. There are no nations, but self-organised communes (this is what communism means). Not only cash but also all accountancy in human interaction has been abolished. Individuals may live in traditional families or in whatever other form of cohabitation. Children are free; there is no educational system; anyone can learn at any
age, and intellectual or scientific knowledge is just one among other kinds of knowledge. And people do not appreciate arts, as Bellamy’s middle-class connoisseurs would, but instead produce it every day.

Morris’s utopia takes place in London and on the Thames up to Kelmscott. The landscape reveals reconciliation with nature: free-flowing clear waters – as the Counter’s Creek ‘rescued from its culvert’ – huge diversity of plants and animals, recovered woods, plenty of gardens and orchards, discreet infrastructure, and cities that merge smoothly with the surroundings. Every building is carefully placed and ‘of a splendid and exuberant style of architecture’ not copied from any other. If More’s utopia is reminiscent of a monastery, and Bellamy’s of Disneyland, Nowhere appears more like a summer holiday in the country before mass tourism.

Morris does not explain how labour is organised in this pure communism, because people associate freely, and define by themselves their ways of working together. Their individual and collective autonomy matured during the process of revolution. The former dominated classes first learned how to organise politically in networks, not depending on leadership. Later they also learned how to produce without bosses and centralised planning. And still much later, after a period of extreme utilitarianism, perfectly developed machinery, and almost no need for human labour, the most important change came about: having time and freedom of mind to look for new enjoyment, people realised that the material exchange with nature can be fun, and that making things with one’s own hands and mind can be a great pleasure. In other words, they overcame the schism between production (as a sacrifice) and consumption (as a reward). They began to enjoy themselves in so-called ‘easy hard work’, which means ‘work that tries the muscles and hardens them and sends you pleasantly weary to bed, but which isn’t trying in other ways: doesn’t harass you in short’. And they rediscovered old handicrafts and invented new ones, leading to an artistic practice completely different from nineteenth-century institutions. Nowhere’s skilfully wrought and expressive works are part of everyday life, not confined to an awesome sphere of fine arts, nor shielded against use and transformation. Ultimately, all this results in a different view towards technology: while people in Nowhere held on to machinery for ‘all work which would be irksome to do by hand’, in many branches ‘machine after machine was quietly dropped under the excuse that the machines could not produce works of art’.

Building is one of the most appreciated activities in Nowhere. Some people – referred to as ‘obstinate refusers’ – even forgo the annual haymaking festivities, so as to continue with their building activities, and remain fearful of running out of opportunities for engaging in such artwork. It is usually done in smaller or larger groups, which organise autonomously, in accordance with the skills and experience of each craftsman. The idea of a new building and its major lines are discussed in the commune, and then the group is free to decide what to do and how to do it.

William Guest, the protagonist of Morris’s utopia, gets to know the construction sites of a road and of a house. In both, work goes on in a festive atmosphere, as if it were a play, supported by jokes, food, drink, and interestedly watching bystanders (no construction site is screened against public curiosity). The young men who make up the road-mending gang, looking rather like ‘a boating party at Oxford’, take pleasure
Construction sites of utopia

in the joint bodily effort or the kind of ‘easy hard work’ mentioned above. The housebuilding workers, besides enjoying the working process as such, also cooperate for another reason. Their aim is to redeem a beautiful landscape from the sins of the nineteenth century: ‘the site has been so long encumbered with an unworthy [house], that we masons were determined to pay off fate and destiny for once, and build the prettiest house we could compass here.’ 18

The new house does not satisfy any immediate functional demand, nor does it supply a market or fulfil a public plan. It may later find more or less temporary users (in Nowhere people are not attached to one particular plot), but it is above all meant to improve the place where it stands. The group, composed mostly of middle-aged men and women, seems to function as an artists’ collective. They share a rough idea of their common project, having decided, for instance, to make the house all of ashlar masonry and carvings, despite the difficult transport of the stones. However, there is no rationalisation, nor design, nor any other previous definition of details. Each individual can develop his or her imagination in the process. The division between design and execution, intellectual and material labour, creative geniuses and an uncreative mass does not exist. Even the word ‘architecture’ sounds strange to most people in Nowhere, while their slight hierarchy on the building sites is based on the recognition of craftsmanship, not on social domination.

A radically revolutionised understanding of nature, work and art underlies the production of space in Nowhere. Morris sees emancipated labour as a corollary of an emancipated society, and this kind of labour is what he calls art. At the same time, the emancipation thus envisioned is so radical that one may speak of an abolition of labour. Nothing that would usually be associated with labour (pain, boredom, compliance, domination) exists any longer. Work in Nowhere is done out of choice, not out of necessity. No one is compelled to do anything.

News from Nowhere has often been dismissed as idyllic, pastoral and nostalgic, in spite of the fact that it includes, not only machinery and electricity, but disagreement, grumblers, sadness and even murder, not to mention the history of fierce revolution. Maybe Morris’s un-ironic representation of a joyful life causes embarrassment to us, because we tend to associate such images with margarine advertisements. But regarding the topic discussed here, I interpret Nowhere as a glimpse of what human space and its production can become if only freed from the commodity form. There would be no need to achieve final products, to satisfy standardised or exquisite wants, or to distinguish sharply between planning, production, distribution, and use. Instead, a continuous process of collective and inventive interaction with nature may take place.

Thomas More’s utopia points to a pre-modern society with no growth and a space that is so immutable that there would seldom be any construction sites at all. Bellamy tries to set his utopia in the future, but in fact only amplifies the logic of his own present, regardless of historical agency. Human life and human spaces are as commodified as before, both in production and in use. Morris, in contrast to Bellamy, takes the risk of picturing a future after the future, i.e., an epoch which would no longer be deducible from his own present. Not only objective structures but also correlate subjective dispositions disappear. Morris knew Marx and Engels’s critique of so-called
‘utopian socialism’; already in 1884, Morris noted that the content of a better society can only be dealt with ‘in negatives’. ‘There are certain definite obstacles to the real progress of man; we can tell you what these are; take them away, and then you shall see.’ Even so, Morris makes the bold effort of trying to imagine what cannot be foreseen. Not for the sake of conducting people there, but to broaden their desire. In regard to architecture this means that instead of aiming at ideal products to stage an ideal society, we may envision a process of production of space which would itself be part of a free life.

Notes

1 The following is part of a larger project on the Construction Sites of Utopia currently in preparation. This project has been funded by CAPES, CNPq and FAPEMIG.


4 Edward Dodwell, A Classical Topographical Tour through Greece during the Years 1801, 1805 and 1806 (London: Rodwell & Martin, 1819), vol. 2, pp. 184–185.

5 Thomas Codrington, Roman Roads in Britain (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919).


8 Bellamy, Looking Backward, p. 87.

9 See Edward Bellamy, Equality (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1897), a sequel written by Bellamy to clarify the ideas of the first book for both his followers and his critics.

10 News from Nowhere was first published as a weekly serial in The Commonweal (Journal of the Socialist League) between January and October 1890. An unauthorised book edition appeared in Boston in the same year. The first authorised book edition, for which Morris revised the text, was published in London by Reeves & Turner in 1891. I use here Morris’s 1892 edition, including illustrations and marginalia, William Morris, News from Nowhere or an Epoch of Rest: Being some chapters of an Utopian Romance (Kelsmccott: Kelmsccott Press, 1892).


12 In 1871 Morris obtained tenancy of Kelmscotton Manor, a building constructed around 1570 in the Cotswold village of Kelmscotton, which he used as a country house until his death in 1896. He made the trip on the Thames from London to Kelmscotton several times.

13 Morris, News from Nowhere, p. 31.

14 Ibid., p. 251.

15 Ibid., p. 139.

16 Ibid., p. 260.

