Architecture and Utopia, 2015.
Roger Luckhurst

Thomas More's *Utopia* is very precise about the layout of the fifty-four identical towns of the island, 'all with the same language, laws, customs and institutions' (53). The housing takes the form of flat-roofed, three-storey terraces running the whole street (an avenue twenty feet wide), with double doors that open and close at a touch and with sealed, glazed windows. Occupancy is allocated by lot and changed every ten years. More prompts an obsession with the peculiarly precise detailing of the architectural dispensation of these Nolandias. This, I suppose, is because your ideal cornice or pelmet is easier to imagine than the dynamics of social interaction: they don't do unpredictable things.

Modernity's secular utopias are blueprints for realizing communalism through building. Charles Fourier's microscopic detailing of his *phalansterie,* organised around a continuous peristyle, a covered street-gallery allowing for perfect circulation for the denizens of Harmony, might seem like oddly misplaced energy (not quite as odd as his sexual obsessions, admittedly). But it is these specifications of buildings that concretise the utopian vision. Fourierist models get sketched out by Stedman Whitwell in his plans for New Harmony, but are actually realised by utopian industrialists at New Lanark and Saltaire, or in the *familistère* at Guise. The science-fictional imagination of Hugh Ferriss's *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1929) or the sets for *Things to Come* (Menzies UK 1936) derived from a century of realised architectural utopianism.

It is still possible to take a guided tour of another achieved fragment of the utopian city, although if you want the bilingual guide it is best to book a long way ahead. Le Corbusier's L'Unité d'Habitation de Grandeur Conforme (The Standard Size Housing Block) in Marseille was inaugurated in October 1952, the first element of the Radiant City that the architect had first envisaged in plans and models in 1922 and again in his book, *Towards a New Architecture* (1927). L'Unité was intended to be the first of eight blocks, to house twenty thousand people after a catastrophic loss of housing stock in the war. The first block had revolutionary social intent, which Le Corbusier already claimed even at his inaugural speech had been realised: 'Left to their own devices in the building … these Marseille tenants rapidly formed an association, as a real vertical community without any political affiliation, to defend its interests and to develop its human values'. The building also announced a revolution in form: it was built 'without regulations – against disastrous regulations' and was one of the earliest experiments in concrete *brut* – raw and unfinished concrete, complete with the blemishes that retained the marks of its casting and construction (see Rüegg). Brutalism followed, particularly associated with the radical planners and architects of the British post-war reconstruction.

In the end, L'Unité d'Habitation remained the single prototype for an unrealised city: it was the only block built. It is now hemmed in by large-scale mass housing of less distinguished design and murkier political intent.

Perhaps it was significant that when I visited in the summer of 2015, the major art exhibition at the Vieille Charité, the museum in the fever hospital in the port, the oldest part of Marseille, was called *Futurs de la Ville aux Étoiles,* which tried to hide its entirely science-fictional content under the respectable art historical names of Matisse, Miro and Calder on the posters (see Poullain). There, amid the drawings and maquettes of *La Citta Nuova* by Sant'Elia (1914) or Malevich's Constructivist skyscraper *Gota 2-A* (1923-7) was a vitrine by La Fratrie called *The Island of Lost Modernism* (2014). This contained a three-dimensional rendition of the desert island cliché, complete with lone palm tree, but strewn with the debris of bits and pieces of Le Corbusier's L'Unité building, washed up on shore after an unspecified catastrophe.

The vitrine seems to suggest that in 2015, the dystopian narrative about the failure of Modernist social housing is still predominant. This was the same summer when the Brutalist signature building in East London, Robin Hood Gardens by Alison and Peter Smithson, was once again refused protected status by the Conservative government and was yet again placed under threat of demolition after years of deliberate neglect. It was also the summer when Ben Wheatley's film version of *High-Rise* premiered, forty years after J.G. Ballard's dystopian novel was first published. Ballard's conservative satire actually follows the design of L'Unité very closely, down to the mid-level self-service supermarket and roof-top gymnasium. Ballard's book was a deliberate perversion of the social panic around mass public housing in the early 1970s as dangerous urban sinkholes of black and poor populations. Ballard experimented with what these environments might also do to the detached elite of middle-class professionals, delightfully tracking their anthropological reversion into savage tribal violence. It was written in the middle of the complex demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe estate in Saint Louis, thirty-three identical eleven-storey buildings designed by Minoru Yamasaki (architect also of the World Trade Center in New York), finished in 1954 and dynamited out of existence as a disastrous social experiment between 1972 and 1976.

It was the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe estate that architectural critic Charles Jencks's *Language of Postmodern Architecture* (1977) declared as the moment when Modernism came to an end, blaming abstract design rather than the city's social housing policy for its failure (see Bristol). Jencks set in place a convenient myth that, followed by Fredric Jameson and others, has provided reductive narrative of the rupture between Modernism and Postmodernism, grasped simplistically through contrasting architectural designs.

Yet 2015 was also the year that the architecture collective Assemble was nominated for the annual Turner Prize for art, less for discernible 'art works' than for their practice of collaborative urban transformation and temporary intervention since they formed as a loose grouping in 2010. I spent an afternoon bouncing around on their foam renditions of concrete Brutalist playgrounds at RIBA in London, although they were nominated for their work at Granby Four Streets in Liverpool. Typically, Assemble follow a contemporary understanding of the utopian impulse as mobile, fugitive and ephemeral, as an unfolding process rather than a completed object. Their work emerges out of an alternative line of architectural theory and practice that ignores those big dumb monoliths of Utopian Modernism and Dystopian Postmodernism, picking up instead from the playful subversions of the Archigram group in the early 1960s or the more trenchant archi-textural interventions of the French Utopie group between 1967 and 1978. Utopie wrote in 'Utopia is Not Written in the Future Tense' (1969) against 'the fetishism of utopia', utopia as 'luxuriant merchandise, of sparkling dazzle'. They denounced the quirky plans for 'mobile cities, walking cities, soft software, the end of shortage, omnipotent technology, the playfulness of gadgets, city lights, the technology of the Concorde'. 'In the meantime', they said, 'in everyday life, nothing of this: work, weekends, work, and more work!' It was the quotidian that they wanted to transform. It was Marxism that would do that in 1969, and something mutated, no longer quite Marxism, by the time the group (which included Henri Lefebvre and Jean Baudrillard) disbanded in 1978. That weird theoretical mutation of utopian thought has continued ever since.

All of this slides in and out of focus on the periphery of sf criticism, although perhaps it ought to feature more. Architectural form is often how sf instantiates the imagination, how utopian and dystopian worlds are rendered in word and image. We need also to understand how the science-fictional and the architectural have been interwoven for at least five hundred years, since More's blueprints for living in *Utopia*.

Further Reading

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