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INTRODUCTION

1   This interview took place in early January, 2023 between Belgian philosopher, art historian, writer, and activist, Lieven De Cauter (b. 1959), and Ralph Ghoche, Assistant Professor of Architecture at Barnard College, Columbia University. De Cauter is Professor of the Philosophy of Culture in the Department of Architecture, Urbanism and Planning at KU Leuven and the author of some 20 books. Beyond his academic writings, De Cauter has published poems, essays in architectural criticism, and numerous columns and opinion pieces in newspapers and on digital news and commentary websites. He has also been a leading figure in contemporary struggles for social justice, co-founding such organizations as the BRussells Tribunal, an international activist network mobilized against the logic of permanent war, and BACBI which advocates for a Belgian Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel.

2   This interview covers questions that are at the center of three of De Cauter's books, considered by the author as forming a trilogy. The books were published over the span of 17 years and treat such global developments as the war on terrorism, the US

occupation of Iraq, and the crises affecting the planetary climate and species' biodiversity. The first book in the trilogy, *The Capsular Civilization: On the City in the Age of Fear*, appeared in 2004, followed by *Entropic Empire: On the City of Man in the Age of Disaster*, in 2012, and concluding with *Ending the Anthropocene: Essays on Activism in the Age of Collapse*, which was published in 2021.

INTERVIEW

RALPH GHOCHE: I immediately thought of you when Caroline Maniaque, Sandra Fiori and I started to work on this issue of *Les Cahiers* because your essay on Parckfarm and, of course, your work on utopia and on the question of the commons, overlaps so well with the themes that we were trying to broach here. I thought I would start by recalling some of your work dealing with the commons. In fact, I remember reading your essay, "Utopia Rediscovered" and, while I teach Thomas More to students, I never really picked up on the fact that Utopia appears at the very moment in the 16th century when the commons were beginning to be enclosed. Could you start by telling us a little bit about the relationship between utopia and the commons as you see it?

Lieven De Cauter: Yes. Well, you could say that the book *Utopia* has been misread for some 500 years, or at least for some 200 years. The reason is that the commons were erased from our collective consciousness by five centuries of enclosures, or privatization of the commons, which are precisely the point of ignition of the book. Maybe one of the most famous passages of the first book is about sheep, known as such peaceful animals, eating humans. "I hear that your sheep are devouring humans," says the narrator, and then he gives a real rant, a real indictment against the crime of enclosures. Namely—all sorts of instances—nobles, but even the clergy were taking common land in a way that comes close to ethnic cleansing. They destroyed entire villages, they chased away the people, as More so very graphically describes, making clear to the reader in the beginning and at the end of the book that he is a man of justice. He was an undersheriff of London and looks at it, from a legal viewpoint, as a crime, in a sense, as a sort of profound injustice. A crime because these people were being robbed of their grounds, their villages, their grazing ground, their common ground, their subsistence economy—because of course, around 1500, most of Europe lived in a subsistence economy. That means that most of what you needed was there for you. Apples in the woods, mushrooms in the woods, your pig could graze legally. (A fantastic book on this right to the forest before the enclosures is the *Magna Carta Manifesto* by Peter Linebaugh, which inspired me greatly).[1] And moreover, once these people were doomed to move around, vagabondage was heavily criminalized and theft was punished by hanging. It was a double crime.

So, in this struggle, you have a bill of rights to the commons. And this very important concept of the commons was washed away by this wave of enclosures, which went on for centuries. For instance, in Belgium, the Belgian state, one of the first things it did in 1830 was nationalize—and then later privatize, but often nationalize—all the remaining medieval commons. It started in England, but it took quite a few centuries before this process was closed. And this process of the closure, the enclosure and the destruction or the annihilation of the commons, also annihilated the concept of the commons in our minds. So, we think—by we, I mean here the spatial disciplines, but one could also talk in general—we think of the world in terms of public or private; and the third category, the commons, has been washed away. And therefore, indeed,

you could find entire libraries, entire bookshops, including mine, where there was not one book on the concept of the commons. [And even, for instance, books on utopia. Take for example, Hans Achterhuis—locally, a very famous Dutch philosopher who wrote three books on utopia.[2] In his first book—a big chunk of a book—the word "commons" is absent.[3] And then, in his third book, he acknowledged my criticism with regard to the importance of the commons for utopia. That, indeed, there was a sort of blind spot that is, in fact, part of the historical process of this erasure].[4]

So first, the physical enclosure, and then the conceptual or the ideological erasure of the commons is very deep. You could say that it is still very visible in our world. Think of how many times the concept of commons is used in the media. Well, incredibly marginally.

RALPH GHOCHE: But then came the rediscovery of the commons

Lieven De Cauter: Indeed, the rediscovery of the commons, the resurgence of the idea of commons has been a wave, which became visible around the 2000s, with the other globalist movements. Of course, the origins are maybe a little bit before, with very visible symptoms, like Elinor Ostrom's seminal book, *Governing the Commons*—from 1993 I think—for which she got a Nobel Prize in 2008. And then you could also speak about this idea of open source, this discovery of the digital commons, which is a very strong movement.[5] Also with the hippie movement, and then a whole wave of Fab Labs, urban farming, there's been a whole wave of the cooperative idea coming back. And, in a sense, also a rediscovery of the anarcho-communist tradition, which, of course, is based on this idea of anti-statist and anti-private. So, the third option, the third political option, if you see it as a political concept, has this anarcho-communist tradition of mutualism, the mutual duty of people, part of society, neither controlled by the state, nor based on profits, like what we call the private economy.

You could also say that we are somehow in a very lucky moment with this resurgence of the commons. And you could explain this lucky moment partly because of the tradition of the protests against consumption in the 60s, and all the verification and ramifications of it—like for instance, the hippies. But also then, the technological version of the open-source movement: sharing. Think of Wikipedia, before we get too abstract. Wikipedia is, in fact, magnificent. With all the criticisms you can have about it, it's an example of something that, mostly, we think of as utopian; namely something that is neither public, state controlled, private nor profit-based. [So, most people, if you say, "Yes, but this is possible," and they say "No," there is Wikipedia to prove them wrong.] And also, Elinor Ostrom, which is the beauty of her work, has proved that commons could persist over centuries—she was studying very traditional commons, like Alp meadows, fishing grounds, and irrigation systems on several continents and in several countries. And you can imagine that, of course, for an irrigation system, fishing grounds, or meadows, it needs that time span. Which is, for us, also an eye opener, because we think of commons as, "yeah, yeah, yeah, we can do it for a while," but in the end, it is very unstable. Which might be, of course, the Achilles heel of the commons. So, there was a huge wave of rediscovery, which my work on the commons is a part of. For me it was, like for so many of us, an incredible discovery, and also an incredible amazement about the disappearance of this crucial concept of common grounds, of sharing. Because if we think of the world in its broadest, plainest concepts, we think of oceans, air, language. Are they state controlled? No. Are they privatized? Thank God, no. They are what I call the universal

or global commons, as opposed to the local or particular commons, like Ostrom's examples, or cooperatives and digital commons like Wikipedia.

The commons constitute, in fact, a totally new vision of all things human. It implies a new world vision. It also implies the new vision of human nature: that we are not the rational, competitive, egotistical creatures that neoliberalism has taught us to conceive ourselves as, but that we are deeply mutualistic, that we are made by social bonds, which are not political bonds, but come before any political bond.

RALPH GHOCHE: So, if the commons predate the figure of utopia, or the modern idea of utopia—I'm very interested in the similarities between these two concepts, but also the very real differences. If utopia appears in the wake of the enclosures of the commons, how is utopia different?

Lieven De Cauter: The famous neologism of Thomas More, which we cannot repeat enough, has a double meaning: "*Eu topia*," the good place, and "*ou topos*," no place. So, it is a nonexistent, ideal place as told by the storyteller. So, it is the vision, largely inspired by Plato's *Republic*, of an idea of what Aristotle calls a "proposed constitution." More is very clear in the book: he says, because private property is the reason of all the evils of enclosures, we have to think of a political, societal system, an organization without private property—very simple and very straightforward.

And it is indeed true that utopia is a sort of radical response to this enclosure. And that is also my redefinition. Because you could say that the commons and utopia are somehow linked, but are very different. Utopia, especially in the last 30 years since neoliberalism, has had a hard time, let's say.

Utopia has been considered essentially authoritarian: that is, because it was egalitarian, it was authoritarian. And indeed, if we look around—and also, if you read the second book of *Utopia*—it is a mixed cloister and thus very uniform: common meals, uniform clothes, strict day order, repetitive architecture. It is a cluster of mixed cloisters. You can say that what he did is take some ideas from Plato. Take the cloister as a model, because all the cities are the same, like all the cloisters are the same. And so, you're not free to go where you want to go in a utopia, which is also clear in most utopias. That's true for China and true for the communist Soviet Union. So, this authoritarian side has, in fact, jeopardized the beauty of utopia. So, what I tried to do is go back to the essence of utopia, defining utopia more as a force, as a moment in time, as a vision, as a hope, namely, as a sort of radical response to the enclosures of the commons, and not as a system. Because most utopian systems, unfortunately, have been quite disastrous so far. I tried to save utopia by going back to its point of ignition and, by doing so, redefining it to get a post-totalitarian concept of utopia. I hope that answers your question.

Figure 1: A view of the greenhouse cafeteria (center) and vegetable garden (right) in Parckfarm, in 2015

Wikimedia Commons, [online] [https://nl.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bestand:Bruxelles_-_Parc_Tour_et_Taxis_2015_%286%29.JPG]

RALPH GHOCHE: Yeah, it absolutely does. And the reason I asked about utopia is because I wanted to get to a term that you use more recently in relation to the Parckfarm in Brussels and to Tempelhof in Berlin, this term of "concrete utopias." I'm thinking of the many criticisms of the utopian tradition, while acknowledging the benefits and the importance of that tradition. People like David Harvey will speak about utopias having been mostly utopias of spatial form. And, in *Spaces of Hope*, he calls for a utopia of process, where temporality, time, and transformation actually play important roles in social movements, so that it's not all established and thought out at some fixed point of origin, but a utopia that is more nimble, flexible, adaptable. And so, I wondered about your term, "concrete utopias," given some of your criticisms of the utopian tradition.

Lieven De Cauter: The term "concrete utopia" is, of course, a sort of label of good practice, if you will. It is a very modest term. Concrete here means smallish, down to earth, pragmatic, let's say. For instance, Parckfarm might not be known—I just tried to make it famous—but it is very small and very modest. It's a good example of, let's say, cooperative urban farming, and in this respect, it is generic. It could also be in Paris with Doina Petrescu's Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée, her Agrocité. In fact, Parckfarm was directly inspired by the Agrocité of Doina Petrescu, I think.[6] Or you can think of examples from Berlin.

RALPH GHOCHE: Our readers may not be familiar with Parckfarm. I wonder, actually, if you could just lay out what it is, and then we can get back to this question of how it might belong to a concrete utopian tradition.

Lieven De Cauter: Parckfarm, for me, was a sort of discovery of the power of urban farming, the necessity of urban farming, and the cooperative, bottom-up self-organization of citizens. So, Parckfarm is a fantastic site because it was the place where all the goods that came into Belgium were controlled. It has this sort of industrial, pre-industrial grandeur with a warehouse, which is sort of a palazzo for goods, and is now an upmarket mall. Then there was a big train station, which has

been upgraded by Neutelings Riedijk who got prizes for it.[7] It functions as a sort of city square—a bit too commercial for my taste, but not so bad. And then you have a park. Part of the train track was in a sort of artificial valley, in which there was a festival called Parckdesign held once every two years. A couple of architects won the commission—literally a couple—an activist architect, Petra Pferdmenges of Alive Architecture and Thierry Kandjee, the landscape architect with Taktyk.[8] They made an entry with a team of architects and a team of artists, collaborating with neighborhood and youth organizations and bringing together all sorts of people to really make something that could be self-sustaining after they left. And that worked. So, after the festival was over, I'd say from April to late September, if I remember well, the news was announced on closing night that it could go on, and it still exists. That's quite a miracle. So, with greenhouses and all sorts of things, architects played a very important role in this experiment with several minor interventions, like a hen house, a dry toilet, etc. But what really remained was the greenhouse as a sort of center for organic food markets, for children's activities on Wednesday afternoons, for Sunday snacks, and also the center for urban farming because, of course, there were allotments for the community made on a cooperative basis.

So, this all went on, and proves in a way, to me, that this is a heterotopia—because I think this term is maybe also important to introduce here—a place a bit outside of other places. Heterotopia is a concept that is maybe, for me, almost more important than the utopia. So, as a sort of park, a place that is a bit outside of the everyday, it can do two things: be a paradigm for a more ecological, short-chain, sustainable food production, and be an incredible catalyzer for social interaction in a neighborhood. The neighborhood was quite problematic, because you had some tension between different communities and quite a bit of crime, minor crime. So, I think Parckfarm has changed this.

However, we should maybe add a footnote here. There is the risk of it being an instrument, a catalyzer for gentrification, which is one of the very tricky parts of laudable initiatives of this sort: that they somehow make a buzz around a neighborhood and are often a trigger for gentrification, as is happening a bit around Tour et Taxis, a large former industrial site in Brussels. But then again, letting a neighborhood sink into decay and into tensions and crime does not help either. So, it's very difficult I think, but that's maybe a theme in itself that we can leave for some other time.

So, now that we know what Parckfarm is, let's go back to your big question of concrete utopia. Now, you could say a concrete utopia is often a heterotopia. It is a very concrete space, like a theater or a park—which are both examples of Foucault, the inventor of the word heterotopia—where we can do things that are difficult in normal society. A nudist beach is a classic example of Foucault's, but also the graveyard, a totally different space than a normal space. The theater, anything can happen in the theater, the cinema, etc. So, these are spaces a bit outside of daily life. And I think it is a concrete utopia because it does utopian things somehow, bringing people together on a cooperative basis, bottom-up, in a diverse community—because of course, it's a very diverse community—so, (what I call) "eco bobos" and veiled Muslim women are living there together, in a way, and are sharing, maybe at different times, this greenhouse. So, this catalyzing possibility I would call utopian, in a sense, because it is away from the merely public, and it is away from, in our official

ideology of neoliberalism, the almost unthinkable fact that you can do things outside the profit, egotistical, and rationalistic logic.

It is also concrete, and that's maybe an important point. You could also say this of Tempelhof, that the concrete utopia is not radical, in the sense that it is a hybrid. As you can see very clearly in Parckfarm, and in a sense also in Tempelhof, it takes the public, the state, the authority and the city, each having a very important part to play. Like in Parckfarm, the Brussels institute of Leefmilieu (Brussels Institute for Environment) was the initiator of the whole project, which is, of course, government linked. And the neighbors also have a private initiative. So, often—though it might not sound very exciting—concrete utopias open up alternatives to the classic extremes of communism, which is statist, and involves destroying the commons and destroying the private; or neoliberalism, destroying the state and making the state totally subservient to profit as a sort of lubricant for profiteering; or of anarcho-communism, which tries to do away with the state, too, and get rid of private initiative and the logic of profit as much as possible. Concrete utopia is a sort of moderate position—you could also say moderate utopia instead of concrete utopia, in the sense that it uses this triangulation of the common, the private, and the public. Instead of making it an ideological, rigid choice for one of these three poles—these extremes that we have been living through, over the decades—we need a dialectic of the public, the state, the private, maybe also a bit of profit, and the commons, the sort of cooperative neutrality of the commons.

RALPH GHOCHE: These pressures you just described, the forces of commodification... In a way, Parckfarm seems to have been a piece of land that no longer served its historic purpose and was there for the taking.

Lieven De Cauter: It was a wasteland. Which in itself is very interesting: longtime inaccessible wasteland.

RALPH GHOCHE: But I'm thinking there are other possible concrete utopias that actually formed very much because of these pressures that you described. So, I'm thinking the ZAD de Notre-Dame-des-Landes or Occupy Wall Street. How do those fit into this story? Because they emerged from very different conditions. And yet, they do very much partake in actioning new forms of collectivity, what David Bollier described as "commoning."

Lieven De Cauter: La ZAD, I happen to know people there, but it's been quite a while since I've been in contact with them. So, the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, not mentioned but sort of envisioned in my book, *Ending the Anthropocene,* in another chapter on art and activism in the age of globalization.[9] But anyways, it is very radical. This is a sort of, I would say, anarcho-communist based rejection of state. So, that's not a moderate utopia, it's a concrete utopia. I would grant them that, but it's also very radical. And so, La ZAD was first the "*zone d'aménagement différé.*" It means that the state decided that, "okay, we don't know what to do, but we will make, one day, an airport there." The ZADists took this acronym of ZAD and made it "*zone à défendre,*" a zone to be defended, and said: "this zone is ours." They won the battle, which is very, very important to stress if we discuss the ZAD, I think. They won the battle, and it was quite a while. It took, I think, 10 years, maybe more. And it was Macron, I think, who decided that the airport would not be realized. So, it's quite recent, even if there were different stormings, but the ZAD was so well organized that they could mobilize thousands of people to defend the ZAD.

RALPH GHOCHE: I think 40,000 people at one point.

Lieven De Cauter: It is amazing. So, once the victory was there, they decided okay, thank you very much, Mr. Macron. We will stay here anyhow, because for us, the ZAD is a concrete utopia of a post-capitalist society. Not in dreams of a faraway future, but here and now. A typical anarchist idea of direct action in the here and the now. And so, yeah, that is a very radical form, even if it's very pluralistic, because you have different strands, and very different people who are not always agreeing on everything. But basically, they agreed on this zone. That is, of course, also why the state has a big problem there. Because it is an example of a sort of post-state, post-capitalist territory, where the police cannot enter. So that is a big problem. And I'm not so sure if this will last long. But it's a very strong example.

Occupy Wall Street, on the other hand, is a very temporary occupation directly inspired by the wave in 2011 that started in Tahrir Square in Cairo, where a then not-so-well-known form of activism was invented: occupation during days and days, by a large number of people, as a protest to bring an entire system to a halt. That was so inspiring, that it was repeated in Syntagma Square in Athens, in Puerta del Sol in Madrid, then in Gezi Park, and later in Istanbul. But the wave, by September, came across the ocean to Zuccotti Park in New York, and then again, beginning all over in Amsterdam, Rotterdam. It was all over the place, Occupy everywhere. So, it's a very interesting phenomenon of this form of action, of temporary occupation of a square or a park by a group of people, that swirled back and forth across the ocean in the year 2011.

Especially if you think of Tahrir Square, it's an incredible feat: 18 days occupation under the incredible violence of the state with, on the average, hundreds of thousands of people camping there. So, I would call it the instant urbanism of the masses. I have written in one of my books on this miracle of Tahrir Square, so to speak. But it is a political action. I mean, it is not like Le ZAD or Parckfarm, a sort of permanent occupation. They never had the idea of staying there forever. They stayed there to change society, to bring the dictator down. Once the dictator was down, the action ended. Unfortunately, it ended not very well, because Mubarak was just replaced by El-Sisi, and I'm not so sure that is so much better.

RALPH GHOCHE: I think it's quite a bit worse, in fact.

Lieven De Cauter: Exactly. Anyway, you could say, the concrete utopia has many forms, with some more radical, like La ZAD, some more political and temporary, like Occupy Wall Street, or Tahrir Square, and some very modest, moderate, like Parckfarm, or so many initiatives of urban farming, urban gardens, fab labs, open-source communities. Also, there's all sorts of commons in our world, in a sense, at work. But I think, in a way, because of the ecological and the diversity aspects that it brings together, urban farming is a very good example of what concrete urban activism can be today.

RALPH GHOCHE: Yes, and here, in fact, you anticipated my next question, which was really about urban farming and the renewed interest in agriculture. Because so many of these concrete utopias seem to want to take up that challenge of regaining the metabolism that once existed between the city and its surrounding region. I'm thinking of Carolyn Steel's *Hungry City,* or the long discourse on urban ecology.[10]

Lieven De Cauter: We are waking up—too slow, and too little too late, maybe—but we are waking up to a new reality. And I think maybe the pandemic has helped, in that

also we realize that we absolutely need a change. Not only from an ethical stance, namely that it is unethical and irresponsible to eat all of these fruits and all these vegetables and all this meat from all over the world. We should eat locally-produced food, so why not start to produce it ourselves? But it is also, I think—it's maybe the more radical vision—anticipating the fact that maybe one day, we will need it. In the sense that, if our society continues as it does, collapse might become inevitable. So, in a collapsing world—think of war—having your vegetables in your backyard and sharing them with your neighbors might be much more of a lifeline than having a stack of money, because it might be worthless.

RALPH GHOCHE: This is the rise of the term "resilient city," right? That the city would need to be flexible and adaptive enough, ecologically and socially, to resist shocks from the outside.

Lieven De Cauter: Exactly. So, I think that's very important because, with this urban farming, not only do you produce food, but you also make communities. And I think this should be much more enabled by the government. And that makes me sort of skeptical. I was about to say pessimistic but that's maybe too much, but a bit skeptical in a sense. Somehow, these commons initiatives—which are many, both big and small —like cooperative mushroom plantations with remnants of coffee in the cellars of a slaughterhouse here in Brussels, or Rotor, which is a sort of recycling debris of architecture, to use it again, etc.[11] All these initiatives together are very impressive, but the threshold of scale, the scale jump, they somehow don't make. So, it remains quite marginal if you look at the city or the economy at large.

RALPH GHOCHE: It seems to me that initiatives like Parckfarm are not conceived to be simply ends in themselves. There are scales of involvement, and places like Parckfarm are terrains of initiation. They mobilize individuals and form collectivities. The message can then run either downwards to affect individual habits and routines, but also upwards to engender larger social change, political change, etc. Is that how you think about these little spaces?

Lieven De Cauter: Yes.

RALPH GHOCHE: In fact, I'm interested in the kind of impact that they can have.

Lieven De Cauter: That's exactly my skepticism, that the scale jump is not happening. It is all too small. The real farmers, and some people in organic farming say, "Listen, folks, with all due respect, let's call it urban gardening, because this is not farming." The sort of production you need to really make a difference, to really feed a neighborhood, you cannot have with these small allotments. So, urban farming would need to reach a much larger scale, and I think this interaction between local farmers, especially around the city, and inhabitants, and the short chain that they can organize between them should be much more promoted and enhanced. Boeren en Buren (Peasants and Neighbors) is one of these organizations, or Velt in Leuven, where they really, structurally, bring together citizens and producers directly, without the retailers in between.[12] And that is another way, and maybe a much more viable way, in the question of scale.

RALPH GHOCHE: You mentioned that you teach in the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture as a non-architect, but as somebody who's been interested in architecture for a very long time. Can you tell us a little about where you see architecture overlapping with some of your other interests? But also, I know that you are teaching a course on architecture and

activism, how do you understand the role that you see architects playing with regards to the new awareness around the commons?

Lieven De Cauter: I did a PhD on Walter Benjamin, the first philosopher you can say to be really working on the theme of the city. His unfinished *Opus Magnum*, the *Passagenwerk*, was about the city; about Paris as the capital of the 19ᵗʰ century.[13] So I have a very big interest in architecture. It would be difficult to talk about the city without being interested in architecture, because the city is architecture. So that is the beginning. I also did my Master's in Art History with Geert Bekaert—who is, for Belgium and the Netherlands, a very important figure in the architectural theory and criticism. That helped me to get interested, and to jump a bit from visual arts and literature to architecture as my main interest and fascination. So, that is, in fact, almost an aesthetic beginning. Then of course, once you think of architecture as a fascinating art, then you see that it has so many ramifications that you maybe go back to power politics. And because, of course, the city is not only stones, but much more, it is also always a social and political construct. So, that brought me into an eternal dialectic between architecture as an art and architecture as part of the polis, of politics. And I do think that the architect is almost, in these days, in this age of disaster and maybe even collapse, is bound to broaden the discipline, "to feminize" it, to quote Doina Petrescu. So, not the master builder, who has the genius of design, the very macho approach that you can see in Le Corbusier, and in Mies, and in Niemeyer, but more the architect as mediator of a community project.

RALPH GHOCHE: They're in the utopian tradition, in fact.

Lieven De Cauter: Well, yes, before there were utopian visions, the architect was the master who has the blueprint of the perfect city, now, the activist architects of today move more towards a sort of caring mediator, curator, because *Cura* in Latin is caring, to take care. And I think, again, that's another side of Parckfarm, is that you can see that at least six or seven architects have been involved in this process of making small interventions in this project. And I do think, more and more, *we can see architects around us who explicitly leave this paradigm of the male master builder towards a more feminine caring, mediating, curating player in a team of urban actors.* And that is, you could say, the core of the course that I teach together with Gideon Boie in Brussels, on architecture and activism: to look for this broadening, this redefinition, and a sense of the discipline of architecture and the broadening of the role of the architect.

RALPH GHOCHE: What are the students working on in that class? Do they design?

Lieven De Cauter: No. We study texts, like Doina Petrescu, Judith Butler and Harvey. Lately, we've been working with a text that we've made ourselves, as a synthesis on forms of activism as democracy in the City: political activism, urban activism, and architectural activism as the holy grail of our quest. So, we discuss the three forms of activism—political activism, urban activism, and architectural activism—with examples. That's the first part of the class, which is a Friday afternoon. It's quite a utopian class, very horizontal, very festive. We say that it has the commons both as form and content. The first part is theory, discussing, reading. The second part is students presenting.

The presentations of the students are very important, because it's an international group. So, by their presentations, we get a vision of practices all over the world. At least all over Europe, but often, even beyond that. That is, you can say, the enthusiasm. For instance, an Egyptian student gave a presentation some years ago on

all the events of Tahrir Square, in which he took part. So, all that gives the course a very lively, very slice-of-life atmosphere. And, of course, we have a few darlings, you could say, good practices, paradigmatic practices, like Rotor, like Doina Petrescu's Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée, like Eyal Weizman, which is totally different, forensic architecture, decolonizing architecture. So, these are a few practices that we can use as concrete examples when we are conceptualizing the new role for urban activism and architectural activism in the contemporary city.

Most often there is a third part: one of these urban activists, architectural activists, or activist architects at work come in for a public conversation, in what we call "the sofa talks." It's all very informal. They talk about what they do, and we discuss with the students. Then, there is an aperitive, and then, whatever, we go and eat, maybe sometimes with the speaker. It's a course from 2:00 in the afternoon, till sometimes 10:00, 11:00 at night. So, it is an unending, open ended, festive class. It's quite utopian because it's an elective, so we have incredibly motivated students. And it happens more than once that students come back the next year, if they're still in the school, to follow the course again in a new role of free student, half assistant. This Egyptian ex-student even wants to even make a film about the course...

RALPH GHOCHE: Do you think these bottom-up attempts at thinking about architecture, inclusion, caring relationships with communities etc., are having an effect in terms of the way architecture is thought of? I mean, it's certainly having an effect at colleges and universities, architecture schools—you see it around— and I wonder if you see practices actually changing, corresponding to this.

Lieven De Cauter: Well, that's a difficult question. In a sense, not being an architect, I'm maybe not the best person to really respond to this, because it's a question that is much more for somebody inside the practice. But I think I have the beginning of an answer. I think, at least in Belgium, things are indeed changing with the recent tradition of the Bouwmeester, or "the building master"—that is, the chief architect, both for the region and cities. The Bouwmeester is somebody who really has to look for the common interest above all particular interests, so he has to look for architectural quality, but also try to integrate, as much as possible, social and ecological considerations in any project. At least for those projects the city or the state is initiating, which of course is quite important. Because of this, you get a sort of natural alliance between the bottom-up architectural activists and the building master as the go-between with the city or the authority and the developers. As the Bouwmeester has an independent role, I think this force, this sort of alliance, has, at least in Belgium, changed the field and practice of architecture quite a bit. So much so that they might sometimes kick out these chief building masters because they're doing their job too well: the project developers and their friends in politics want to do their thing mainly as they see fit.

A second remark, or partial answer, would be that the project developers have recognized the power of these urban activists, and they use them as a sort of warm up for a site. So, you could say Greenwich Village is and remains a good example. There were empty buildings, and to make sure that they're not squatted, they gave them to artists, to urban activists. In Greenwich Village, this was not a controlled process, but it became the model. You get the artists, the intellectuals, the bohemians, and they make a buzz around the neighborhood. It's all funny, and funky, and fancy, and so people say, "wow, this is the place to be," and you get a process of

gentrification. I wouldn't say that I quote official text on this, but it is, in a sense, part of the policy that developers use.

It is really a lubricant to make the neighborhood ready for a new step, a new step of gentrification. Or to give it a sort of therapy, if you want, for the changes that will come. So that is one of the risks of this new wave of alternative "temporary use," which of course, in Brussels at least and I think everywhere now, is very interesting, very necessary, and almost part of official policy. You have empty buildings—Brussels has a huge number of empty spaces. So, you give them as a sort of empty spot, if you want, to an organization, which is totally bottom-up, but you can give them more and more subsidies so they become a bit more controllable. And they are used for the local communities and disenfranchised people, but they also create a buzz around a location, which is the ideal moment to then make a new project. That's what they did to the World Trade Center here in Brussels, which is nothing like the World Trade Center in New York, but it was, of course, modeled after it. So, it was all buildings to be demolished, and they gave them to art schools, to architect offices, to artist collectives, and that created a buzz, that is now giving credit to this new project done with one of these architect offices that was inside the building. So, this is a very clever strategy. I'm not sure if it's always bad. So, within capitalism, it might yield better results than without.

RALPH GHOCHE: But I imagine there's always a possibility of subverting that process, and if you're aware of the direction that these things end up moving, that perhaps one can work to keep things permanently unfinished, or permanently temporary. And I think it also involves the architect moving outside of their zone of expertise and understanding that policy, that regulation, that all these things are part of resisting the processes or the forces of commodification exerted on cities and neighborhoods.

I wanted to end with a question with which I've struggled a lot myself when teaching on ecology and the environmental crisis. I really wanted to get your bit of wisdom on this. A lot of your work nears the claustrophobic, and you write a lot about the melancholic qualities or the catastrophic nature of world history. For example, in *Entropic Empire,* published in 2012, you contend that we are moving towards what you call, the "Mad Max phase of globalization." But I wonder, in regards to the environmental crisis and global heating, I feel that students are often hitting a wall of despair, where there's an inability for them to really act on their fears and anxieties. And I wonder if you have any tactics for dealing with this wall of despair. In one of your recent essays, you draw a distinction between what you call "waking up" and "standing up."

Lieven De Cauter: It's a big question and I struggle with it myself. I don't think, in fact, there is a direct answer to it. My answer has been, for many, many years, my sort of coat of arms, my battle cry and my daily prayer: "*pessimism in theory, optimism in practice.*" Which is a bit of a joke... If you look at the world today, and you inform yourself, if we do not change really, really radically—and there, I'm totally in line with Extinction Rebellion or Scientist Rebellion—if we don't go for a state of emergency with radical measures, like during the pandemic, we are fucked! Pardon my French. Really radical measures: stop flying, stop eating meat, or red meat at least, stop, stop. Just stop. And we can do it. The pandemic proved it. I mean, if you would have told me that one day I would wake up and all the planes in the whole world would be grounded, more or less, I would have said "No, that's not possible." But it is possible. So, for me, the pandemic has a very beautiful sign. It shows the radicality of the measures we can take. So, if we don't take that sort of radical measure—and we will not do that, unfortunately, unless there is a mass rise up—and

that is this jump from waking up to standing up. There, I totally sympathize with Extinction Rebellion, Scientists Rebellion, to say we have to call for a state of emergency and radical measures and with the climate strikers.

"System change, not climate change." Of course, it's easy to put it on a board and hold it in front of you, but system change is a huge request, and the system will not change by itself. We are headed towards disaster because the system is locked into its logic of growth. If the food production, the meat production, the airplane fuel consumption, the plastic production, if every sector of the economy has to grow, then we are doomed. So, growth should be demonized, in a sense. Growth is the ultimate problem of our world and our system. I could go on for hours and hours. Pessimism in theory.

Yet, if I look at some practices, I'm optimistic. We have given examples. You can do many things locally (so we don't have to repeat this). You can do more globally, like for instance, Extinction Rebellion, Scientist Rebellion, that every academic should openly support, or at least passively, initiatives like Scientist Rebellion. But I think all academics should radicalize because they have the privilege of knowing, so they have also the duty to act accordingly. And I think that makes me an optimist in practice. Of course, the pessimism of theory—I understand the new generation, the problem your students have, this feeling of powerlessness, this eco-grief, this wall of despair, as you aptly call it. The facts are daunting. The sixth mass extinction is wherever you look—the melting glaciers—what they called in 2001 "the permanent catastrophe" is here. The essay of that title was republished in the first book of, what I call, my millennium trilogy, *The Capsular Civilization: On the City in the Age of Fear* of 2004. So, the permanent catastrophe, it is here, and it is, I have to admit, unfortunately, much quicker and much worse than I thought back then. When I said the permanent catastrophe, I was aware it was coming. But now we are in the midst of it. Belgium, a very rainy country in our collective imagination, is having chronic droughts now, and on the other hand, we had a major flood with huge destruction, with many people dying... But "business as usual" must go on! And shall go on. And what we will see is a very ugly world order where disaster capitalism and push-backs, armed border controls, and walls, and razor wire, and cameras, etc. will be prevailing. So, I hate to admit it, but the theoretical pessimist in me is winning from the practical optimist.

NOTES

1. Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008.
2. Herman Johan "Hans" Achterhuis (b. 1942).
3. Hans Achterhuis, *De Erfenis van de Utopie*, Amsterdam, Ambo, 1998.
4. Hans Achterhuis, *De Utopie van de Vrije Markt*, Rotterdam, Lemniscaat, 2010.
5. Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge (UK)/ New York, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

6. The Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée (AAA) is a Paris-based collective platform founded by Constantin Petcou and Doina Petrescu in 2001. See [online] [https://www.urbantactics.org].

7. Neutelings Riedijk Architects, based in Rotterdam, was founded in 1987 by Willem Jan Neutelings and Michiel Riedijk.

8. Alive Architecture was founded in 2015. Taktyk was founded in 2006 by the architect, Sébastien Penfornis and landscape architect, Thierry Kandjee. Both firms are based in Brussels, Belgium.

9. The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination is a network of socially engaged artists and activists founded in 2004 by Isa Fremeaux, Jay (formerly John) Jordan and The Vacuum Cleaner.

10. Carolyn Steel, *Hungry City: How Food Shapes our Lives*, London, Chatto & Windus, 2008.

11. Rotor is a Brussels-based cooperative design practice co-founded in 2006 by Lionel Devlieger, Maarten Gielen and Tristan Boniver.

12. VELT vzw is a non-profit association active in Belgium and the Netherlands based on three pillars: ecological gardening, ecological nutrition and ecological living. Velt is an acronym for Association for Ecological Living and Gardening.

13. *Passagenwerk* was an unfinished project of German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, written between 1927 and 1940. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project,* translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, prepared on the basis of the German volume edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Cambridge, Mass/Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.

AUTHORS

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