BUILDING A WORLD OF REFERENCES

Reinhold Martin's Utopian Realism into Practice: Counterprojects revisited

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Introduction

For an architectural apprentice the years of education are but a small window to get acquainted with some of architecture's large history. It is the responsibility of academic staff to provide a most effective filter for any apprentice to build a world of references. Architectural theory and critique are such filters that allow an apprentice to cope with various architectural discourses. However, when dealing with the design craft, such a filter is much harder to provide. It should be a methodological tool, an inquiry device that integrates an equivalent of critique into the act of designing. It should allow an apprentice to recognize which contingent design decisions are legitimate – for his own designs as well as for designs of others. To propose such a filter I will combine elements from Reinhold Martin's¹ essay *Critical of What?* (2005), with elements from Isabelle Doucet's² historical reading *Understanding Postmodernism in Practice* (2012).

When Reinhold Martin called for *Utopian Realism* (Martin 2005) this was primarily a breaking away move in the criticality debate. Martin suggested to reinstate the concept of utopia as a mediator or filter to the otherwise unrestrained realism he associates with the post-critical. While building his case, Martin intelligibly refers to Colin Rowe and Jacques Derrida to redefine and re-enact utopia within architectural critique. However, in Martin's essay there is no suggestion how to translate Utopian Realism into a teaching tool or inquiry device.

On the EAHN conference in Brussels,⁴ Isabelle Doucet presented a historical reading of the *counterprojects*, a methodological tool used in the 1970s and 1980s by Maurice Culot & Léon Krier and others. She defines the original version of counterproject as 'a methodological device, [that] has a complex and ambiguous relationship with the real. It is neither utopian nor realistic but attempts to address and transform concrete, real situations, however without proposing innovative, progressive alternatives. As a drawing-manifesto, it holds the middle between a critical statement and a concrete vision for the future.' (Doucet, 2012)

Doucet was primarily interested in what the tool initiated and affected. I want to understand how it works, how it is made and what its intentions can be. Therefore, it is important to isolate the tool from the particular mindset of the 1970s. Although, according to Doucet, a counterprojects is neither utopian nor realistic, I am convinced that this only applies to the original version. It is my opinion that once the tool is abstracted to a generic definition it is exactly the extension of Martin's *Utopian Realism* into the realm of design. I will argue that one way of bringing this *Utopian Realism* into an academic practice and teaching is by making contemporary drawn manifestos, made for and made by the students. It is a one-way logic only. I do not claim that the counter-implication *only through drawn manifestos can architectural design be studied* would be true.

Article

In order to master the design craft - as for any specialism - an apprentice is bound to perform the critical act of knowledge gathering. The craft is to be learned by dismantling and piecing back together (parts of) examples of predecessors.⁵ Drawings, models, impressions, evocations, and technical data are produced and reproduced, thought over, theorized and debated. The apprentice learns by studying examples, by trial and error. He needs to reconsider whether context has changed, whether examples, types, and models are still applicable or need to be adjusted. That is how the apprentice, as well as the skilled designer can expand his knowledge, a knowledge that is called upon (maybe through free association) in response to a (partial) design problem. One could say that quite recently, any apprentice has also inherited the burden to judge a large number of 'new' types, models, configurations, or design solutions that have been the by-product of the rapidly evolving, constantly regenerating, and materialistically innovating industry. However, this burden is not an entirely new phenomenon; for one thing, the pool of examples is ipso facto constantly growing. For another, the effort to either include or exclude examples in the world of references is inherent to the discipline. Therefore the only new thing about the aforementioned burden is the fact that innovation driven industry sped up the process of accumulating possible examples.

A lot of sorting out is to be done, if one wants to create a world of references; by this I do not mean a collection of references, stored externally, for the apprentice to be studied at his earliest convenience, but a mentally stored library of parts derived from

examples previously analysed and dismantled. In other words, it is not a collection to be studied, but a collection that has already been processed through thorough investigation. This endeavour is two-fold, because it needs to be done for both theory and practice. It goes without saying that without any proper filter this is an impossible task. It cannot be just a matter of exhaustively cleansing the world of references by arbitrary rules.

Reinhold Martin's Utopian Realism

Reinhold Martin's essay Critical of What? Towards a Utopian Realism (2005), first appeared in Harvard Design Magazine 22, and was republished in the anthology of Sykes Constructing a New Agenda: Architectural Theory 1993 – 2009 (2010). This essay bears the roots for the full-grown argument that he developed in his book *Utopia's Ghost* (Martin, 2010). Besides the obvious positioning within the field of architectural critique, the text can be read as a plea to take a clear stand, to be transparent about intentions as an architect, especially about the world as envisioned, to which architecture contributes. What will be predominant here is that his text also determines who has what kind of power over the discipline and, thus, who bears what kind of responsibilities. Regardless whether the architectural discipline is autonomous or not - the answer is irrelevant for this argument - one can state that it is a system within which steering mechanisms are present.⁶ What is interesting in relation to this paper is that Martin makes an overt attempt to address one of these steering mechanisms within the architectural discipline. Martin pins a tremendous responsibility on the academic architects for producing the references of good standards. This is not to be understood as a conservative claim - or illusion - for an elite to rule the discipline. It is to call attention to the responsibilities of a well-defined group within the system, leaving aside their specific weight. That is why, according to Martin, academic architects should excel in Utopian Realism. The central question for this paper then shifts to 'how to translate Utopian Realism into academic practice and teaching?' I would argue that one way of bringing Utopian Realism into practice is by making *counterprojects*, also known as drawn manifestos.

But first I will summarize how Martin came to define the aforementioned task for academic architects. Martin draws on George Baird's inquiry of the post-critical project and rehearses the recent history of criticality. According to Martin the post-critical sees the critical - with Peter Eisenman as its main protagonist - to be a discourse without political relevance because it strives to be autonomous, hermitic, and impermeable for the public at large. While the post-critical denounces the critical 'language' that only few can speak and understand, they also incidentally denounce its academic realm in which it is produced and proselytized. This could happen, for the booming market of the 90s, driven by a democratic libertarian mentality, provided a variety of interesting contemporary examples that are real projects produced outside the academic realm. Martin returns the focus of the debate towards this moment where the academic potential is marginalized. He does so to reveal a tendency in the debate to move away from the methodological and theoretical to the practical and pragmatic, from the 'hot' to the 'cool' version of the discipline. Martin wants to counter this because '...the problem is not that architectural discourse is too academic to have any political relevance, but that it is not academic enough.' (Martin, 2005) This is not just a claim for some more rigour. Although he welcomes Bruno Latour's insights on 'critique' [of facts] he is not so happy with the middle road [matters of concerns] as a possible outcome. For Reinhold Martin being more academic stands for being more precise and taking a clear stand. Hence, his questions: 'By what criteria is the "post-critical" asking to be judged, beyond mere acceptance and accommodation of existing societal, economic or cultural norms?' (Martin, 2005) and ultimately '...just what sort of world they are projecting and affirming in their architecture and in their discourse?' (Martin, 2005)

He pitched his cure, *Utopian Realism*, with a sneer at Colin Rowe. 'So, what is to be done? To begin with, rather than lapse into the post-utopian pragmatism of that grandfather of the "post-critical," Colin Rowe, the question of utopia must be put back on the architectural table. But it must not be misread as a call for a perfect world, a world apart, an impossible totality that inevitably fades into totalitarianism.' (Martin, 2005) Nevertheless, when specifying the utopian part I would argue that he echoes the preconditions as laid out by Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter in the first part of *Collage City*. Yet, to explain his concept of utopia Martin prefers Derrida's metaphor: 'a "specter," a ghost that infuses everyday reality with other, possible worlds, rather than some otherworldly dream.' (Martin, 2005) Although this is clear enough to understand the point Martin is making, it is still rather general to translate it to a methodological tool. Therefore, I will dig deeper into the covert source, Colin Rowe, which provides more context and preconditions for this redefined concept of utopia and to draw up specifics for the inquiry tool.

Colin Rowe's classical utopia

Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter put forward two types of utopia: the classical utopia, which is considered to be anterior to the French Revolution and essentially an object of contemplation, a heuristic device, or image rather than prescription; and the activist utopia of the post-Enlightenment, which is described as a political instrument. It are the qualities of the first type that Martin seems to echo to re-enact utopia. To expose the qualities of the classical utopia it is compared with utopia as last known: the activist utopia that was abandoned as a tool by architecture an urbanism. From the latter, two basic - controversial - roots are unravelled for the modern approach of society and social utopianism: the first are constituted by Saint-Simon's ideas, which are responsible for the creed of society as a social contract, and thus, the French rational and mechanical model of a constructible society; and the second is Edmund Burke's influential reasoning on the organic growth of society, which counters the idea that one can interrupt and reconstruct society anew. (Rowe & Koetter, 1984) Although, at first, this might seem as utopianism versus anti-utopianism, the marriage of the two leads to the positivist social utopianism of early modernists instead, which, for example, culminates clearly in 'Frank Lloyd Wright's "In this way I saw the architect as the saviour of the culture of modern American society, saviour now as for all civilisations heretofore" and Le Corbusier's "On the day when contemporary society, at present so sick, has become properly aware that only architecture and city planning can provide the exact prescription for its ills, then the day will have come for the great machine to be put in motion".' (Rowe & Koetter, 1984, p. 13) The idea that fuels the grotesqueness of these statements is essentially what the main thought of Collage City intends to counter, namely that the architect became both messiah and scientist, both Moses and Newton, and this caused an oversimplified urban planning policy

However, the fundamental problem, according to Rowe and Koetter, is the endeavour to provide architecture and urbanism with a precision it can scarcely possess. '...the prospects of scientific city planning should, in reality, be regarded as equivalent to the prospects of scientific politics.' (Rowe & Koetter, 1984, p. 105) They call upon Levi-Strauss' notion of the bricoleur versus the engineer in order to underpin that the knowledge systems of both architecture and urbanism can never be complete, and that is perfectly acceptable. (Rowe & Koetter, 1984, p. 102) The best one can do to respect the complexity is - this is the ultimate message of the book - to recognize the urban fabric as a collage, and to adjust planning policy and urban design accordingly. Therefore, it is wise to remember some aspects of the first interpretation of utopia: '...the classical utopia will offer itself largely as an object of contemplation. Its mode of existence will be quiet and maybe, even a little ironical. It will behave as a detached reference, as an informing power, as rather more of an heuristic device than any form of directly applicable political instrument.' (Rowe & Koetter, 1984, p. 14) In this way, envisioning future urban transformations can be useful if presented in a classical utopian way and dealt with according to the rules of the collage, which is '...a method deriving its virtue from its irony, because it seems to be a technique for using things and simultaneously disbelieving in them, it is also a strategy which can allow utopia to be dealt with as image, to be dealt with in fragments without our having to accept it in toto, which is further to suggest that collage could even be a strategy which, by supporting the utopian illusion of changelessness and finality, might even fuel a reality of change, motion, action and history.' (Rowe & Koetter, 1984, p. 149)

I would argue that In the 'original' intentions of utopia, as defined here by Rowe & Koetter, a strong parallel can be seen with the intentions of *counterprojects*, as produces by Culot & Krier, that stem from the same *Zeitgeist* as *Collage City*. This parallel is crucial to translate Martin's *Utopian Realism* into academic practice and teaching. To be able to define a contemporary version of counterprojects, the original needs to be looked at first. Doucet did investigate the original in order to fully grasp how postmodernism has been practised, especially in the socio-political realm of Brussels in the 1970s. Brussels proved to be a key agent in the development of a powerful international *Reconstruction of the European City* movement. For Doucet the critical project for architectural theory is not studying the meaning of architecture but to methodologically study how ideologies travel through practice and how they are transformed in the course of such travels. That is why she did not analyse how it is made, what it looked like, or what its technique is. Doucet was primarily interested in what the tool initiated and affected. I want to understand how it works, how it is made and what its intentions can be. Therefore, it is important to isolate the tool from the particular mindset of the 1970s. I am aware that I contradict Doucet's reading that says *counterprojects* to be neither utopian nor realistic. Nevertheless I am convinced that Doucet's reading only refers to the specific *counterprojects* as produced by Krier, Culot, e.a. Once looked at the generic version of the tool it can be intended to be both utopian and realistic and thus be linked to Martin's *Utopian Realism*. Hence why I revers Doucet's approach of counterprojects – i.e. to first render its context before zooming in to its kernel.

Counterprojects revisited

The original Counterprojects of Culot & Krier are strongly coloured by the spirit of the early 1970s. Therefore, I will give a coarse overview to render the specific context in which *counterprojects* as a methodological tool finds its roots. Before, I isolated *Collage City* to underpin a crucial interpretation of utopia. However, *Collage City* was primarily a critical voice that looked for a better alternative to modernistic planning. In fact, in the 1960s and 1970s many leading architects, historians, critics, and theorists seized the initiative to deal with this particular concern and founded or reorganized institutes that would be most influential in the decades that followed.

In 1962 Bruno Zevi founded the *Italian Institute of Architectural History*. It was an independent institute at the *University of Venice* (IUAV). It became the leading institute for Italian theory on architecture and urbanism. It was the intellectual environment of scholars like Manfredo Tafuri and Aldo Rossi. It is clear that the *Rational Architecture* movement finds its origin in it.

In 1967 Peter Eisenman et al. started the *Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies* (IAUS) in New York, a non-profit independent agency concerned with research, education and development in architecture and urbanism.⁸ The IAUS was most crucial for architectural theory worldwide in the 1970s and early 1980s. From 1973 to 1984 the IAUS produced a leading architectural journal called *Oppositions*.⁹ Many of Peter Eisenman's European connections got introduced to an American audience through the IAUS and *Oppositions*: Colin Rowe, Kenneth Frampton, Anthony Vidler, Bernard Tschumi, Rem Koolhaas, Leon Krier, Aldo Rossi, Manfredo Tafuri, et al.

In Brussels, in 1968, Maurice Culot et al. initiated the foundation of the non-profit association *Archives d'Architecture Moderne* (AAM). AAM's primary initiatives were to support exhibitions, contribute to research and to publish books. From 1975 to 1990 it published an international magazine on architecture and urbanism, bearing the same name as the association. One year later than AAM, Maurice Culot et al. founded the *Atelier de Recherche et d'Action Urbaines* (ARAU). ARAU completed the AAM initiative with political activism, urban research, and citizen participation.

In 1972 Alvin Boyarski became director of the *Architectural Association School for Architecture* (AA School). Due to profound reorganizations of architectural education in the United Kingdom, the AA School lost it financial support.¹⁰ Boyarski seized the opportunity to make the school a global concern, embarking upon a highly ambitious program of exhibitions, catalogues and publications.¹¹ I am aware that the AA School differs from the other institutes, but I included it in this synoptic list for its important part it played in creating a network of leading figures and providing them with a forum.

Various theories and movement saw the light of day within - or due to - these environments. ¹² From the plurality of constellations that emerged from this fertile breeding ground, I want to isolate the *Reconstruction of the European City* movement. Due to a dense and often historic urban fabric of European cities, large modernistic interventions were perceived as an attack on, or destruction, of these cities. The very specific conditions for European cities caused the protagonists of the movement to emphasize the value en richness of the urban fabric at risk. In general, it is this spirit that fuelled the emergence of *New Classicism* or *Traditionalism* and other initiatives, such as the UK Prince Charles *Foundation for the Built Environment*, and the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation. ¹³ Early trails for this movement are to be found in: the *Rational Architecture* exhibition at the 15th Trien-

nale of Milan in 1973, and in London in 1975; the *Brussels Declaration* of 1978 for the *International Colloquium on the Reconstruction of the European City*; and, amongst others, in the 1980 AAM publication *Contreprojets - Controprogetti - Counterprojects*, a Belgian contribution to the first Venice Biennale. Maurice Culot and Léon Krier are key players in all these trails. Their methodological tool *the counterproject or drawn manifesto* was a tool to produce architectural critique. (Krier & Culot, 1980) At the same time it was a communicational device to engage politicians and users. Therefore the images needed to be highly 'readable' - in contrast with e.g. the images made by the (de)constructivists. They produced clear theoretical representations of how the environment could be to convince concerned parties and to proselytize their tenets. They were convinced that '...a responsible architect cannot possibly build today, [because] [...] the most urgent work is the one of the reconstruction of a global theory." (Krier & Culot, 1980)

Introducing this methodological tool with the aforementioned background information is necessary, because this immediately reveals the very specific conditions and oppositions at the moment this tool was put in place. What I am interested in, in order to elaborate the argument of this paper, is exactly this critical tool, but without taking into account these moment-bound conditions the tool is associated with. I want to define the tool, for what it is, as a technique, distinct from any theory or ideology.¹⁴ A generic definition of the tool, thus cleansed from these specific conditions of the reconstruction movement, can be constructed by listing its abstract intentions. Counterprojects visualize and suggest an approach or attitude for architects that are, or will be, confronted with similar conditions as virtually explored. They are utopian because they envision, anticipate and imagine a possible (part of) future. Yet, they are realistic because they are accurate, precisely measurable, and feasible. However, there is no intention for the project to be realized exactly as envisioned within the realm of the intellectual experiment. (Krier & Culot, 1980) This allows for an abstraction of the real to expose more clearly certain problems that in real situations remain more hidden or are hardly recognizable due to their entanglement with other conditions. To use the words of an earlier quote: we do not have to accept it in 'toto'. The abstraction causes counterprojects to look more radical or provocative. Irony and wit are welcomed for their invigorating contribution to a debate. In addition, very clear graphic allows for direct communication. Krier applied a very cartoonesk style.15 However, in an effort to try to revisit the tool for present use, it is not primarily its opposing character that is appealing but rather its widely accessible character. It becomes clear how the generic approach of counterprojects shares most characteristics with the 'original' utopia, as defined by Rowe & Koetter, and it is therefore one way to translate Martin's Utopian Realism into academic practice. As a consequence, this implies that it is up to architects in the academic realm to produce these counterprojects that carry out examples of Utopian Realism as references for other concerned parties, including architects and

Before concluding I have one final consideration, as the university college of Antwerp is on the verge of reorganizing the architecture educational curriculum. If Martin is right about the tremendous responsibility of the academic architects to produce the references of good standards, then this gives a whole new meaning to the idea that architectural education should be organized according to the needs of society. Because, if society is, indirectly, more served with the 'curing' of the academic realm, then infusing the educational discourse with utopian realism and for example producing and studying drawn manifestos is a primordial need. It is a reasonable alternative considering the flaws that might occur with a one-on-one translation of the needs of society - i.e. if the building market defines the educational discourse.

Conclusion

The Utopian Realism of Reinhold Martin, as a filter to build a world of references, can be translated into an academic practice or educational discourse that produces contemporary drawn manifestos, the revisited technique of counterprojects. Or, in other words, being more academic means to produce counterprojects that intentionally take a stand, make an advisory policy statement about what it takes to be an architect. Counterprojects visualize and suggest an approach or attitude for architects once confronted with similar conditions as virtually explored. This allows for an abstraction of the real to expose more clearly certain problems that in real situations stay more hidden or are hardly recognizable due to their entanglement with other conditions. The abstraction causes counterprojects to look more radical or provocative. However, there is no intention for the project to be realized exactly as envisioned in the realm of the intellectual experiment. It is a technique to bring architectural critique into the field of designing and, thus, into the drawing. As a result architectural critique as a discipline is taken outside the textual realm and merged with the discipline of designing.

To name some critical questions that could be singled out for contemporary variants of counterprojects or drawn manifestos:

- Why do we not live on the Delta Wall? (fig. 1)
- Why do we not make permanently inhabited safe havens inside flood risk areas?
- Can we rethink the prison typology for a dense urban environment? (fig. 2)
- Can the use of natural materials really drastically reduce maintenance costs?
- Should we not favour to build clusters over towers?
- Can temporary event infrastructure turn into city or district centres when the event caravan leaves? (fig. 3-9)
- Is 35% of public space really the optimum quantity for our cities?

Some of these questions have already been the topic of architectural research studios under my guidance. 16 However, only now do the intentions for these studios reach their full legitimacy.

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- ² Dr. Isabelle Doucet is a lecturer in Architecture and Urbanism at the University of Manchester, School of Environment and Development (SED) and is connected as a lecturer and researcher th the Manchester School of Architecture and the Manchester Architecture Research Centre (MARC).
- ³ For a general overview of the criticality debate I refer to Hays, Sykes, et al.
- ⁴ The 2nd International Conference of the European Architectural History Network was held in Brussels, May 31st June 3rd, 2012
- ⁵ The terms decomposing and composing or deconstructing and reconstructing are intentionally avoided to rule out certain connotations.
- ⁶ Trying to map whether these steering mechanisms are top-down, bottom-up, or hub-related is beyond the scope of this research
- ⁷ The Post-Critical incorporates the 'cool', the 'pragmatic', or the 'projective' and represents the discourses of Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting (Somol & Whiting, 2002), Stan Allen, Greg Lynn e.a.
- 8 Arthur Drexler, director of the Department (originally founded by Philip Johnson in 1930) of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art, helped Peter Eisenman to get the starting funds for the IAUS.
- ⁹ Another important magazine was Architectural Design. In 1975 Andreas Papadakis bought the financially troubled magazine Architectural Design (AD), which he sold in 1990 to the well-known publisher Wiley. The London based AD of Andreas Papadakis allowed for a similar debate as the New York based Oppositions.
- ¹⁰ In 1958 the Royal Institute for British Architecture (RIBA) had a conference in Oxford on architectural education. One of its recommendations was that all schools and institutions able to deliver high-level architectural education should be 'recognized' and situated preferably in universities.
- ¹¹ The list of staff attracted in this internationally oriented atmosphere: Charles Jencks, Elia Zhenghelis, Bernard Tschumi, Peter Cook, Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, Léon Krier, e.a.
- ¹² These institutes and players that are mentioned fitted within a larger network. However, a more refined overview of other players and institutes involved exceeds the argument of this paper.
- ¹³ The foundation campaigns for the preservation and enhancement of the built and natural environments. Since 2003 The Driehaus-prize for Classical Architecture was organized as a counterweight to the pritzker-prize for modern architecture. After Léon Krier won the first edition, it was successively won every other year by Demetri Porphyrios, Quinlan Terry, Allan Greenberg, Jaquelin T. Robertson, Andrés Duany & Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Abdel-Wahed El Wakil, Rafael Manzano Martos, Robert A.M. Stern, and Michael Graves.
- ¹⁴ For a deeper analysis of the role *counterprojects* played in Brussels' local government, Brussels' architectural school La Cambre, and its influence on a larger scale, I refer to (Doucet, 2012)
- ¹⁵ This emphasized the polemical position of Krier. However, more generally, a cartoon technique is considered a powerful communicational device that can transfer a concise message to a large audience.

¹⁶ For the question about safe havens inside areas of disasters I refer to my paper, 'Architecture, Absolutely Critical', in the Proceedings of the New Urban Configuration Conference, Delft, 2012. The question about prison typologies was the topic of a research studio in cooperation with Lieven Achtergael, commissioned by the Justice Department of the Federal Government of Belgium. The question about temporary event infrastructure was the topic of my research studio last year. A report on the studio was published 'Thoughts for Architecture' (Verbruggen, 2012).

Captions

1

Contribution to the international conference: Deltas in times of climate change, Rotterdam 2010; Verbruggen & Naudts; living and working on the Delta Wall.

2

Outcome of research design studio 2009: prison typologies; students Mertens & Schulte; Panopticum.

3

Concept model; input for a research design studio 2012.

4

Outcome of research design studio 2011: universal typologies and the event square; students Garcia & Senas; Terrace view from hotel towards event square.

5

Concept model: terrace view; input for a research design studio 2012.

6

Outcome of research design studio 2011: universal typologies and the event square; students Garcia & Senas; Hotel façade towards event square.

7

Outcome of research design studio 2011: universal typologies and the event square; students Lambert & Trouvé; School of Architecture façade towards event square.

8

Outcome of research design studio 2011: universal typologies and the event square; students Lambert & Trouvé; School of Architecture interior.

9

Outcome of research design studio 2011: universal typologies and the event square; students Käuferle & Peronnet; Library façade towards event square.

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