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Ward, Matt

Resistance is futile: design for transformation

Designing a critical utopia: Facts, futures and fictions
Matt Ward

> We do not wish to project a calm secure future. We are disruption. We are hot… We are cannibals, cowboys, Indians, witches and warlocks. Weird-looking freaks that crawl out of the cracks in America's nightmare.[i]

Design is always ideological, whether this is grasped or utilised by the designer or not. The formulation of concepts (whether small or large in scale), the application of research (whether material or human) and the adoption of design processes are all affected and influenced by specific worldviews that are shaped and molded by a wide variety of social and cultural factors. This means that design always responds to and is generated from the context in which it's produced; it is therefore a product of the society it originates from. Although this is arguably a simple observation, its form is only truly understood in relationship to design's second action.

As well as being a product, design is also a producer. Essentially a future-oriented activity design's second action is that it is world-shaping. As designers we engage in the 'not yet', the 'soon to be' and the 'maybe one day', sometimes even the 'wouldn't it be cool if'. Design is therefore the imagination and production of the future and a field that cannot claim autonomy from the politics of social change. I am therefore positing that design has a double action; it is both, and at the same time, reflective and constitutive.

Throughout history designers and architects have imagined new social and spatial formulations, commonly represented as ideal cities, these spaces belong to the long standing realm of the utopian imagination, these fictitious places are an example of designs double action in that they reflect the society and culture in which they are spawned whilst also attempting to re-design the future.

The utopian imagination
This essay examines the interplay between the ideological and the utopian in design and architecture. Although utopian thinking has been heavily criticised by many post-modern and post-structuralist thinkers, it has also seen a recent resurgence in the examination of both modernist and pop architecture with recent exhibitions in major London galleries. Utopian critique has also seen a revival within academia since the late 1980's.

Social, economic, technological and religious utopias have been part of the western tradition of literature for over four hundred years, they include some of the great works of Bacon, Bellamy, Swift, Huxley, Bradbury and Orwell. The utopian imagination can be seen to pervade and inform much of western cultural production.

At the core of utopianism is the desire to be somewhere different, the desire for a world to exist that is a happy social place, free from the problems and difficulties of this world. Whether in the form of imagined cities or new social relations the utopian desire is spurred by a feeling of discontent.

Design and architecture, like utopianism, allow for the imagining of new spatial, material and social forms. The implication of this is that some designers attempt to

harness the world- building quality of design and design artefacts and spaces to inform and inspire change. This indeed was one of the key drivers behind the modernist movement, in which men such as Le Corbusier concocted visions of the future where social problems were solved through the rationalism of design. Projects like the Unité d'Habitation were created in an attempt to solve the post-war housing problem and act as models or catalysts to change France socially for the better.

Unfortunately the modernist utopian dream did not work out as planned. The designers got it wrong, and the avant-garde became the worst thing of all – they became conservative. A cogent case in point is Mies van der Rohe. Mies was an architect with strong socialist values, and for him, though unfortunately for others, there is no room for dissent within the walls of the great modernist temples that he himself, acting as master designer created. During a trial on the twenty-third floor of Mies' steel and glass skyscaper, the Chicago Federal Building, Yippie Abbie Hoffman was told by presiding Judge, Julius Hoffman to "Get back in your place - where Mies van der Rohe designed you to stand". This was a significant moment for several reasons; firstly, the trail was symbolic of the growing social tensions in late 1960's America, secondly the Yippies were a group of young, radical, anti-war protestors being tried for conspiring to incite a riot during the 1968 Democratic National Convention, they stood for a political freedom that was being restricted and controlled by both the state and its architecture. This unfortunately meant that architecture that set out to give people freedom became ultimately a tool of control.

If we examine how design influences everyday life it is clear that it can assert control and power, this is not to say that all design and architecture is controlling, but design certainly has this potential to shift the power relations within a given situation.

So after Mies, Corb and Gropius was there room for utopianism in design? Was there still hope for social change through the human act of creation? Amazingly there was. The sixties brought about a whole new wave of theorists, artists and designers that believed in social change – that believed in revolution! From the Situationists to Archigram we saw the culture of the day move towards a new radicalism, a re-birth of the avant-garde.

However, I believe that something had changed, a significant shift has occurred. The work of Archigram and Constant Nieuwenhuys presented us with a different type of utopianism, some even describe it as anti-utopianism. They learnt from the mistakes of their great modern forefathers. Moving their utopian visions from totalities of social action to schemes that allowed the notion of difference, difference meaning that the control of the programme of the space was opened up to new potentials – instead of defining space for singular, limited and specific use, Architects looked towards creating spaces which relied on the difference of the occupants to define use and identity. They designed spaces that worked in the in-between space of choice and control, they created a metamorphosis of action.

Transformation and social change
> The transformative potential of Utopia depends on locating it in the future, on thinking through the process of transformation from the present, and identifying the potential agents of transformation.[ii]

Post-modern theorists, such as David Harvey and Jean-François Lyotard, have described the utopias of modernity as forms of 'terroristic meta-narrative', whereby dominant discourse act to quash individuality and restrict society to narrow, forced growth. However, for the rest of this article I will focus on a very different form of utopia: a utopia of difference. The focus on the utopia of difference, enables designers to define and dream of new forms of social and spatial existences without creating univocal spaces of restriction. To ground this in an example, I shall consider the work of Superstudio. Instead of assuming and defining the programme of space, the way in which people move and use space, Superstudio allowed for different use and action within space to define the architecture. Superstudio's 'continuous monuments' construct both a critique of modernist utopianism whilst setting out a bold vision of the future, a future of openness and difference.

This is what literary theorist Tom Moylan refers to as a 'critical utopia', one that rejects domination and promotes difference:

> [Critical utopias] are reflexive in the sense that they are aware of the limitations of the dominant utopian tradition, but also in that they are self-ironising and 'internally' deconstructive. Accordingly they attempt to realise the contours of a desired future society in their very textual form via incorporation of elements of contradiction, ambiguity, and openness. In doing so, they disrupt the unified and homogeneous narrative of the traditional utopia and demonstrate the multiplicity of possible futures.[iii]

As a formulation of the future that remains open and unfinished, the critical utopia demands of the reader/viewer to question current modes of existence by confronting them with impossible and sometimes distasteful future worlds. It is through this conceptualisation that I believe design can learn from. Design, as led by technology research and innovation has been overrun by poorly conceived utopian visions since the 1950's, a large majority of 'visions of the future' affirm dominant discourses and act to reduce future potential. Research over the past ten years has focused on a vision of pervasive, ubiquitous computing which 'seamlessly' and 'calmly' integrate wireless communication with our everyday lives. However, it is important to be critical and question the driving force behind this kind of corporate vision, to uncover what value systems they are up holding and to understand that what we witness is nothing short of a piece of carefully crafted fiction that belongs to the realm of the utopian imagination.

With this, I suggest that design has many similarities to the art of science fiction writing. It is the creation and generation of possible futures. The key to success is the generation of a convincing, coherent narrative that engages and excites the viewer. Design, as with writing, has many techniques available to it in order to generate the required belief, the perceived plausibility of the future world often relies on leaps of the imagination and the suspension of disbelief.

The formation of utopian and dystopian worlds, as informed by criticality, becomes one of the many tactics available for social change. Design has the opportunity to play a key role in political, technological and environmental change, were designs double action can be utilised to both question and mobilise possible futures. Through the creation of open, pluralistic and ambiguous futures we can aid the development of a

positive future world, where through the potent agency of design one can, as Zygmunt Bauman puts it:

Expos[e] the field of the possible in which the real occupies merely a tiny plot.[iv]

[i] Abbie Hoffman, "Revolution for the Hell of it" in *Cultural Resistance Reader*

[ii] Ruth Levitas in Tom Moylan *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination.* Routledge, 2003, p14

[iii] Michael Gardiner "Bakhtin's Carnival: Utopia as Critique" in *Bakhtin: Carnival and Other Subjects.* Ed. David Shepherd. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993, p26

[iv] Zygmunt Bauman, *Socialism: The Active Utopia.* New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1976, p13