Utopia is a malleable and elastic concept. The term can refer to an ideal society, but what constitutes this society remains a point of disagreement. Whether a real utopia can exist and, especially, endure is a knotty question for debate, particularly in the era after Communism’s fall, since utopian desires were often linked by twentieth-century intellectuals with totalitarian ideologies and the regimes of the Soviet Union and China. Historian Russell Jacoby posits two basic forms: “blueprint utopianism,” which is implicit in the realization of a government premised on a utopian model; and “iconoclastic utopianism,” which, simply said, is the need for the idea of utopia to live in our imagination. In the creative world, many artists have striven for utopian ideals while working in collectives and have articulated the need for utopianism in less tangible and, probably, more successful ways. These looser or more abstract methods of visualizing utopian tenets form a thread that runs through modernity and postmodernity. Utopias are based on a tenuous paradigm (for this is a word from the Greek that, after all, means “no place”) and, when implemented, rarely last for a sustained period of time, but they can during their brief lives be places of creative ferment—of inventiveness—that generate ideas for further experiment. As we see in the short essays that follow, individuals may also use visual imagery, architectural spaces, design processes, and urban land to create “utopias” that provide respite from or alternatives to the demands or structures of contemporary life.

Long before they are enacted as actual models of living, utopias tend to make their appearance in texts. Within historical narratives, they are, more often than not, nostalgic projections on a reconstructed past or a distant locale. Even in the fictional realms of literature, they rarely occupy a present time and real place but, rather, an imaginary past, an invented present in a faraway site, the future, or the world of fantasy. When located in a reimagined ancient era, they can be triumphs, as with the Greek poets’ Golden Age extolling the prelapsarian existence of humanity at one with nature. More often than not, though, utopian fiction shows its underside, for the idea of utopia is frequently intertwined with notions of dystopia, an experiment that takes a tragic turn. Thomas More, in his Utopia (1516), conjures an isolated island to describe a better world but one that in hindsight sounds fascist, prescient now that the twentieth century is over, while in 1984 (1949) George Orwell positions his utopia gone wrong in a grim futuristic society. Both are characterized by oppressive canons and the suffocation of independent thought. Fairy tales are another locus for utopia. Oz was the place where wishes could come true, yet L. Frank Baum based the Emerald City on the model city—the White City—of the
1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition, a sparkling world (made of impermanent plaster) symbolizing America’s utopian perfection attained with imperialist strategies.

Some prophetic literary works, instead, map utopian concepts that theorists, artists, designers, and architects would adopt and adapt. For example, French utopian socialist Charles Fourier theorized a visionary model of community that would reorganize labor and refashion basic work practice from a dehumanizing or isolating experience into a communal effort that emphasized a shared work ethic and an aesthetically and physically rewarding environment. Whereas this exemplar of a free and unselfish society—which he termed a phalanstère (phalanstery)—was not literally viable, it was influential for social thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such ideas were integral to the planning of utopian communities of various kinds throughout the nineteenth century, including such settlements as Utopia, Ohio, founded in 1844 by followers of Fourier. Near the end of the century, American journalist Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888), a tale of utopian life in the year 2000, inspired like-minded futuristic utopian literature and the founding of actual communities emulating the society he described.

Religious splinter groups gave rise to their own fair share of utopias, perhaps most significantly, in the New World (where the untouched wilds and “pure” lives of North America’s native populations were described in utopian terms in early imaginative and idealized accounts). Dissidents, starting with the Puritans, came from Europe, escaping
intolerance and seeking religious freedom. The Shakers established themselves at the end of the eighteenth century in New York, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. Defined by song, communal labor, monastic living, and ingenious craft, their communities prospered into the twentieth century (one survives today, in Maine, although only a few members remain). Other utopian religious groups included the Amana Colonies in Iowa, the Harmony Society in Pennsylvania, and the Oneida Community, centered primarily in New York. Transcendentalism was another way into utopian living. Along with Henry David Thoreau's utopia of one at Walden, there was Fruitlands, in Harvard, Massachusetts, founded by the father of Louisa May Alcott, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Charles Lane, as well as Fourierist-inspired experiments such as Brook Farm.

The English arts and crafts movement spawned by William Morris encouraged the birth of arts and crafts communities in the United States (perhaps most notably Roycroft, in western New York) as well as across Europe. Some of these also integrated the precepts of aestheticism and the quest for beauty in daily living into their framework, attempting to fuse art and life. The artists' colony in Cornish, New Hampshire, represented these ideals in an elite enclave started with the move there by sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, his wife, Augusta, and the painter couple Thomas Wilmer Dewing and Maria Oakey Dewing. Later recalled as "Little Athens," the colony embraced a hybrid of classical motifs and aesthetic ensembles, couched in the rustic villages and bucolic countryside of New England. The Cornishites' homes and gardens reflected this synthesis: a frieze cast after sections of the Parthenon's runs the length of Saint-Gaudens's studio along with a pergola, while an Ionic colonnaded porch is among the architectural additions to
the nineteenth-century house he had acquired. Thomas Dewing cultivated a wild English garden that also included a wooden exedra, and the several Cornish villas and landscapes architect Charles A. Platt designed harked back to classicizing Italian Renaissance prototypes.

The interiors of the homes in Cornish were similarly arranged. Maria Dewing, a flower painter, wrote *Beauty in the Household* (1882), reminiscent, in its theories, of Morris’s schema for articulated home environments in which the quotidian was made artful and could foster an elevated state of living and being. The copy Augusta Saint-Gaudens owned shows signs of use and care, with pertinent instructions underlined.

Indeed, Aspet, the Saint-Gaudens’s home, embodies a feng shui of sorts: the sitting and dining room walls are covered with tatami mats, and an inlaid Japanese table, a Chinese scholar’s table, and other objects from East Asia coordinate with Near Eastern rugs and American furniture. Maria Dewing also authored *Beauty in Dress* (1881), advice on harmonious feminine garb, later echoed in the elegant—if impractical—dress of Cornish women, yet another distinguishing component of the orchestrated lifestyle in the far-flung locale. Even events, from dinner parties to the performances they staged outdoors, were refined artistic creations. The aesthetic philosophies the Cornishites followed in their rarefied utopia, far from the unsightly metropolis, were personified in art (albeit from a male viewpoint) by the idealized female figures in concert with nature in the paintings of Thomas Dewing or those sited outside in the sculpture of Saint-Gaudens.

The Cornish idyll fell apart once the Dewings departed in 1905 and Augustus Saint-Gaudens died in 1907, and it became oppressively “discovered” by too many urban well-to-do socialites wishing to retreat during the summers from the city. This was not the death knell of the American artists’ colony, however. In that same year, 1907, in New Hampshire, the MacDowell Colony was established farther south in Peterborough. Soon after, more informal colonies emerged in sites as distant as Taos, New Mexico, where the primitive, genuine life was ostensibly still to be found.

Architecture also plays a leading role in the narrative of utopian efforts. From the Italian Renaissance Ideal City and the architectural
innovations developed by, for example, Filarete, to the late-eighteenth-century French visionary architecture of Étienne-Louis Boullée and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, implicit in the thoughtful construction of space is the urge to change and better society. Ironically, both Ledoux’s Ideal City for the Saline de Chaux (the royal saltworks) and Boullée’s *Cenotaph to Newton* were never built. Instead, penitentiaries based on the Panopticon of English reformer Jeremy Bentham were later realized and again raise the terrifying possibility of too much control and demonstrate how an optimistic vision can become chillingly dystopic. Fast-forward to the 1950s in the United States, during the Cold War, and—despite the Soviet Union looming as the titanic example of the problematics of utopian principles and totalitarianism—futuristic architecture and design with a utopian tenor burgeoned, as can be observed in Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic domes or the planned postwar suburban communities led by Levittown, New York, both already begun in the 1940s. The unrest and revolutionary politics of the 1960s brought communes, the direct descendants of Fourier’s phalanstery, and what are now called “intentional communities” such as the more even-keeled and structured collective of Twin Oaks, in Virginia, which thrives today. The 1970s saw experiments with a technological bent, recalling some of the ideas charted in *Ecotopia* (1975), Ernest Callenbach’s fictional account of an ecological utopian state. One is the ongoing project that Italian architect Paolo Soleri established in the Arizona desert in 1970—Arcosanti—which endeavors to merge architecture and ecology to create a self-sustaining community. Today, the Internet is cast as a virtual, if not concrete (but does this matter?) “space” with infinite possibilities, among them a utopian (second) life. Likewise, the micro-utopias conceived by such contemporary artists as Rirkrit Tiravanija show the potential of collective practice and the creative utopian community on a small and manageable scale. At the same time, we continue to see the
production of futuristic mass-audience films such as *Wall-E* (2008) and cyberpunk computer games (*Shadowrun* comes to mind) that feature unchecked technology, U.S. cities in postapocalyptic ruin, and populations deprived of liberty.

In this issue of *American Art*, seven authors describe utopias of the imagination, the pen, the brush, the built environment, and the garden. Prue Ahrens demonstrates how John La Farge’s art manifested his hopes of finding a paradise in distant Tahiti, rather than the realities he discovered when he arrived there in the nineteenth century. Scott Bukatman and Nick Yablou, respectively, write about Americans’ turns to fantasy and desire in comic strips and urban rooftops in the early twentieth century. Dianne Harris analyzes Julius Shulman’s famous photograph of a glass-walled home that depicts the promise of postwar California lifestyles, and Anthony Alofsin explores the debate over Frank Lloyd Wright’s concept for a visionary though functional settlement in his Broadacre City model. Christina Cogdell investigates and questions the future for bioart and biodesign, while curator Susan Cross describes four new contemporary undertakings in which artists bend rules and traditions to create “revolutionary gardens” and foster sustainable communities. Together, these different voices and essays offer a multidisciplinary cross section of some of the many projects that can constitute utopia, its visions, its creative functions, its failures, and its successes.

**Note**

John La Farge and the Imagined Isles

"The eye fairly revels in a delicious fairyland of soft airs and verdurous lands and mild seas and sensuous languor..." So wrote a critic for the Boston Herald after viewing Records of Travel, an 1895 exhibition of paintings and drawings by John La Farge. While featuring some work from La Farge's trip to Japan, the exhibition was mostly made up of his watercolors from the islands of the South Seas: Samoa, Tahiti, and Fiji. There, La Farge writes in his preface to the catalogue, "it was my good fortune to spend a year of recreation and idleness."

The South Sea sojourn began on August 23, 1890, when La Farge boarded the steamer Zealander in San Francisco with historian Henry Adams. As they crossed from Samoa to Tahiti, La Farge recollected, "our feelings are intensified because they are directed toward a far-off island... something wherein to place the ideal." His reverie recalls Sir Thomas More's imagined island, for which he coined the term "Utopia" in 1516. Islands can be idealized; they are isolated and easy to perceive as uncontaminated by social disease. But La Farge was not looking for More's "happy republic"; he was in search of an island far from any civilizing systems. His nineteenth-century ideal returns man to nature. "It is part of the charm of Tahiti," the artist wrote, "that with it there is a history: that it has been the type of the oceanic island in story." Those stories began in the 1770s, when Western explorers first glorified the natural wonders of Tahiti in their travel accounts. Nineteenth-century writers followed, and Herman Melville, Charles Warren Stoddard, and Robert Louis Stevenson, whom La Farge credits for passing "the enchantment of the South Seas... into English literature," popularized romantic tales of the noble simplicity of island life. As La Farge approached Tahiti, he dreamt of "the realization of man in his earliest life," a place...
far removed from the nineteenth-century civilization he left behind. 3

When his cutter docked at Papeete, the capital of Tahiti, La Farge’s dream was shattered by the reality of the colonial town. Tahiti had been under French rule for more than a decade and throughout the preceding century had seen the arrival of Christian missionaries. Adams wrote in a letter home, “My chief trouble is the pervasive half-caste id that permeates everything; a sickly whitey-brown . . . that suggests weakness, disease.” He found distasteful the notion of being “cooped up among two or three thousand such people, in a dirty shanty.” Intermarriage between the sizable European community and Tahitians was common, and social plagues of obesity, alcoholism, and venereal disease were hastening the dissipation of indigenous culture. Adams added, “Rum is the only amusement which civilization and religion have left them, and they drink . . . while cultivation declines, the plantations go to ruin, and disease undermines the race.” Adams purchased an album of photographs in Papeete that picture a landscape urbanized by main streets and aspiring businesses and peopled with Tahitian women wearing “Mother Hubbard”
dress or men going about the courthouses, churches, schools, and military barracks, near a cluttered harbor with mail boats in dock. 5

In the midst of all this, La Farge painted the island he had imagined. The watercolor Women Bathing in Papara River is typical of his pictures included in Records of Travel. La Farge has transported two Tahitian women to a remote domain, living as “water nymphs” amid nature. They are given lightened skin; the central figure is nude, while the second figure has draped the lower half of her body in a gossamer cloth. Following missionary teaching, Tahitian women of the 1890s would have covered up to bathe; nonetheless, here and in other works like Ford at the Upper End of the Vai-Te-Piha (1891), La Farge imagined scenes of uninhibited women in nature. Careful modeling shows up the contours of the arm of the draped woman, and the central woman’s contrapposto pose gives her figure classicized form. The women belong to a Golden Age. Their tropical landscape is localized by palm trees framing a beach and an endless ocean, which stretches behind them in a range of harmonious tones.

These scenes seduced the critics. “No adventurously inclined boy,” declared the Boston Herald, “could well find more complete realization of his desires for scenes of exquisite

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fascination in that marvelous region . . . than are conveyed by these pictures.” What the New York Sun described as a “remote and out of the way part of this considerable globe” was for the New York Tribune “the subtlest, most poetic source of beauty.” And the critics held firm to the belief that such scenes exist; “it seems all a protracted dream, depicted by the most enchanting of dreamers, and yet one feels that it is all real, a verity of verities—that should he travel thither he would see all the things that the artist shows us.”

The writer for the New York Times was enchanted by nature: “Here are many impressions of nature . . . in lands where beautiful color abounds . . . the ever-changing sea . . . scintillating brilliancy of tropical sunshine . . . wonderful vegetation, interesting geological formation of land, rivers, sea and mountains.” Within this landscape abide “natives of magnificent physique, almost nude, displaying powerful forms.” The “amiable savages” belong in nature; this can be seen in the way “color is almost evenly divided between man and his surroundings.” According to the Boston Herald, La Farge’s spectator can “rejoice” in these scenes of an “earthly paradise” with “primitive comradeship.”

Such plaudits and equally enthusiastic sales surrounded Records of Travel. Riding the wave of its success, La Farge fulfilled commissions for travel accounts from Scribner’s and Century magazines and toured smaller versions of the Records of Travel exhibition to Cleveland, Chicago, and Saint Louis. Its reception in the United States suggests a broader cultural longing for what these scenes represent, a remote escape from urbanized modern life, a land before time. Yet by the late nineteenth century, Tahiti was not a remote escape from modernity. Tahiti had never been a land frozen in time. What La Farge painted, and what his spectators seized on, was an island of the imagination, enriched by more than a century of myths of the Pacific, in a sense, a literal utopia—no place.

Notes


3 La Farge cites these writers in the preface to the catalogue for his 1895 New York exhibition, Records of Travel. Quoted in Yarnall, Recreation and Idleness, 2; La Farge, Reminiscences, 346.


5 The Henry Adams Photographs are held at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. See Photograph Collection 40, Album 4: Tahiti.

6 “Our Artistic Library: How It Has Spread the Fame of Boston Abroad”; “John La Farge Pictures,” New York Sun, February 27, 1895, 7; and Royal Cortissoz, “Pictures by John La Farge,” New York Tribune, February 27, 1895, 7.

Æ “Our Artistic Library: How It Has Spread the Fame of Boston Abroad.”


10 “Our Artistic Library: How It Has Spread the Fame of Boston Abroad.”

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Little Utopias of Disorder

Utopias are grand affairs, social laboratories that usually demand quite a lot of hypothetical real estate—an island, say, or an urban conflation of some sort. But I find myself drawn to utopias of a different color. They are local, ephemeral, playful, and disposable, but no less utopic for all of that. The comics page, I propose, offers little utopias of disorder, and attention must be paid.

Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland* was a full-color fantasia that took up an entire page of a newspaper’s Sunday supplement in the early part of the twentieth century (the original strip ran from 1905 to 1914, but subsequent iterations followed). Slumberland was two things in those strips. At first, it was a place to which Nemo was summoned

![Winsor McCay, Little Nemo in Slumberland, April 18, 1909](image_url)
but that, somehow, someway, he was unable to reach. Each early strip ended with Nemo having tumbled from his bed, the aftereffects of whatever obstacles he’d encountered in his somnambulant travels lingering. Later, Slumberland began to constitute whatever space the sleeping Nemo occupied. In the most famous example, his bed grows long legs and gallops down the street with him (“I tell you, Flip, this isn’t safe! I’m going to get out!”). In either case, Slumberland was a marvelous place of wonderful adventures, its dangers never too dangerous, a welcome antidote, one suspects, for the mundane life our Nemo led during the day, a life, however, to which the reader was never privy. Eventually, Nemo did reach Slumberland, whose princess became part of his playful retinue. The comic strips presented Slumberland as a space of metamorphosis, in which the plasmatic possibilities of animation and transformation were latent in every line. The world was no longer fossilized and could instead provide what Sergei Eisenstein celebrated (in the medium of animated cartoon) as the “rejection of once-and-for-ever allotted form, freedom from ossification, the ability to dynamically assume any form.”

The April 18, 1909, episode gives us Flip, Nemo, and a minor character named Kiddo sliding down a banister that not only lengthens and lengthens but develops sharp curves that send first Flip, then Kiddo out of the picture. Soon only Nemo remains, anxiously wondering if this stairway has an end to it at all. Finally it does end, and Nemo sails off the railing and out into space, where he is surrounded by multitudinous stars and a pale orb that might be the moon. “Help! Oh! Oh! Help me! Help me!” he exclaims in the moments before he wakens in tangled bed sheets. This is utopia? By the strip’s end, Nemo could hardly be unhappier. At least, it would seem that way to someone who read the captions. But the art presents a child’s dream of a banister and Nemo as the greatest rider of them all, staying on until the cosmic end of the line (and what a line—the sinuous whip lash curve of art nouveau or steeplechase rides is evoked here). And at the end, all’s well. Nemo hopes he hasn’t awakened his ma but is otherwise unperturbed. Art dominates text, but even the text allows the respite of wakefulness.

Slumberland, then, could be a utopic space of exploration and discovery, despite its risks and frustrations, which can always be escaped, after all, by waking up. But Little Nemo in Slumberland also offered up a utopia to its readers, for whom it constituted a temporary break in the action of the day, a temporary break from the facticity of the newspaper. The utopic space becomes not Slumberland but the space of the page; the utopic time, not the time of the dream but the time of reading—almost a reverie—the temporary immersive entrée into the fantasy of an alternative, fantastic world.

It’s worth thinking about the place of comics in the newspaper. We know that newspapers were important for comics—it’s where they became a true mass medium after a centuries-long gestation period that accelerated throughout the nineteenth century, and it’s where many of its conventions were, if not invented, then at least standardized. But what did the comics bring to the daily and Sunday papers? A handsome compilation of Sunday pages from the supplements in the New York World, edited by Nicholson Baker and Margaret Brentano, The World on Sunday implicitly argues against the uniqueness of the comics, treating them as just one more colorful feature amid a bevy of them. The comics were far from the only feature to use the new color rotary presses: “Easter Fashions Straight from Paris,” “Birds That Blush and Dance,” “How It Feels to Drop Out of the Sky,” and “The Great Airship Races at the St. Louis World’s Fair” are features awash in color, many of them more saturated than the Funnies.

There is a sense of continual surprise and plenitude—anything might happen with the turn of a page: fact, fiction, fantasy, fashion, fun. Seen in this light, the newspaper, and especially the newspaper on Sunday, was a repository of realities and irrealsities, which somehow mingled in genuine, albeit largely regulated ways.
But the comics do stand apart, owing in part to their stability and in part to their prankishness. The comics featured a returning cast of characters: at various times, you could expect Maggie and Jiggs, Nemo, Hans and Fritz, Pat Ryan and the Dragon Lady, Prince Valiant, Little Orphan Annie, Mark Trail, and their retinues. Each strip was formatted similarly from week to week: a full page for Valiant, a smaller space for Bringing Up Father. Some featured filler strips atop or below the main strip, and these also appeared with reassuring regularity. In the anything-goes world of the color supplements, comics provided continuity. There might be some tonal variation: a Sunday Annie might feature a stand-alone gag or an episode from the larger ongoing serial featured during the week, but Annie would be there, and Sandy (“Arf!”), and perhaps even “Daddy” Warbucks. Recurring characters began to appear about 1892 and embark on their endless cycle of gags and misadventures (and, later in the history of comics, adventures and melodramas).

Characters in early comics seem to either create mischief or to have mischief visited upon them, to such a degree that the comics could be seen to offer a more specific utopian fantasy to their working- and lower-class readers: a fantasy of disorder. And yet the comics are rooted in order; after all, they share much with the chronophotographic arrays of Eadweard Muybridge, which broke the process of movement into a series of discrete frames. Across the Atlantic, Etienne-Jules Marey also experimented with recording movement in a process that merged, as Marta Braun has pointed out, graph and photograph. The measured body was a step toward the disciplined body, and so the chronophotograph could be understood as a tool through which the body could be controlled and rendered more efficient. Instrumental reason and an industrial culture dedicated to efficiency constituted a utopic projection of a sort: an interchangeable set of workers who labored without fatigue, endlessly productive, manufacturing the riches of the world (for others). Comics, I argue, countered this utopian fantasy of control in the service of efficient production, and they did so from within the mass media and urban cultures in which the new order had become most firmly ensconced.

Comics predate the advent of chronophotography, and fully fledged picture stories were being published throughout the nineteenth century. But in the wake of chronophotography, comics developed a more sustained interest in mapping time, measuring the moment-by-moment transitions of a body traveling through or acting within space. And yet the movements of those bodies in comics were the obverse of efficiency. Indeed, what the comics measured, with all the precision of a Muybridge or a Marey, was the onset of disorder. McCay’s Little Sammy Sneeze was built around the progress of an action that was always disrupted by the mighty CHOW of the title character.
Children and animals are often the pranksters, setting a plot in motion that could play out in a handful of panels. Rudolph Dirks developed a host of techniques to map the results of the Katzenjammer kids’ endless pranks, diagramming, in effect, the breakdown of the social order. Hans and Fritz were locked in a vaudevillian battle of wits with the Captain and the Inspector, an official of the school system (these are names redolent of arbitrary authority). To take one random example, this fantastically unapologetic pair string up their visiting Uncle Otto and douse him with jam and mince pies as he dangles helplessly from the ceiling. Spankings usually ensued, but lessons were never learned, praise be. (Not to worry. In a contemporaneous strip by Jimmy Swinnerton, Foxy Grandpa, the eponymous protagonist, reliably turned the tables on two young scamps.) Watchdog groups and magazines raised a predictable ruckus about these goings-on, but the utopic pleasures of disorder survived.

Notes


Nick Yablon

John Sloan and “the Roof Life of the Metropolis”

An oasis of quiet or an island in the air, the urban rooftop has invited diverse utopian visions, from the public roof gardens King Camp Gillette imagined in his utopian novel, *The Human Drift* (1894), to the elevated terraces Hugh Ferriss designed for his modernist blueprint, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1929). The utopian possibilities of the rooftop were perhaps most fully elaborated in an article that appeared in Gustav Stickley’s magazine, the *Craftsman*, in 1913. Espousing the Progressive movement’s belief in the capacity of “rational recreation” to produce a healthy and productive citizenry but lamenting the lack of parks and playgrounds in New York, the author looked skyward for the solution, to the “approximately nine thousand three hundred and fifty-nine acres of unused space” that lay on roofs of tenements and other structures. With some minimal refurbishments—a wire cage overhead, a tile roof underfoot, along with various furniture—that “wasted acreage” could be miraculously transformed into playgrounds, open-air classrooms, and athletic fields by day, community centers by night. Through a process of (literal) uplift, the rooftop city would act as a “powerful lever” to solve a host of social disorders. The removal of “idle youths” from the streets would “break up the gangs,” the provision of “wholesome and healthful entertainment” such as dances, concerts, and movies would counteract “the lure of the dance hall,” the reduction of pedestrians would ease street congestion, and the access to fresh air would alleviate the diseases associated with urban living.1

To characterize New York’s tenement rooftops as “unused space,” however, was to disregard the numerous activities that already took place there on a daily basis. As the contemporaneous paintings and etchings of realist artist John Sloan attest, immigrant
and working-class New Yorkers put their rooftops to a wide variety of uses. They were places to carry out domestic chores, such as hanging laundry (Red Kimono on the Roof, 1912; Sun and Wind on the Roof, 1915), or to engage in recreational pursuits such as kite flying or pigeon racing (Pigeons, 1910), a sport brought to New York by European (especially Italian) immigrants in the late nineteenth century. Tenement dwellers slept there on hot summer nights, when their rooms became unbearable (Roofs, Summer Night, 1906), or sunbathed there during the day, stretched out on newspapers or blankets (Sunbathers on Roof, 1941). Others ascended to the roof to hold secret trysts with a lover (Love on the Roof, 1914) or to relax with a child (Woman and Child on the Roof, 1914), to look out over the skyline or into other people’s apartments (Night Windows, 1910), or simply to lose themselves in daydreams and meditations, far above the noise, crowds, and smells of the streets (Sunset, West Twenty-third Street, 1905–6). As a part of the building that was not designed for the tenants’ use and that remained an expanse of tar interrupted only by water tanks, chimney stacks, and pigeon coops, the tenement rooftop was a blank slate that could be freely adapted to multiple activities, both sociable and solitary, public and private. Thus, if the Craftsman presented the rooftop as a utopia or perfected nonspace, Sloan’s artworks portray it as a heterotopia, an actually existing space that is sealed off (unlike a park or street) yet at the same time open to certain individuals (in this case, the building’s residents). In Michel Foucault’s formulation, heterotopias are “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible”—here, the rooftop as both garden, laundry room, recreational space, beach, nursery, and bedroom, among other things. "It is all the world," Sloan said of the rooftop. “Work, play, love, sorrow,
vanity, the schoolgirl, the old mother, the thief, the truant, the harlot. I see them all down there without disguise. These wonderful roofs of New York bring to me all of humanity.  

The rooftop utopia espoused by the Craftsman may thus be seen as an attempt to eradicate—by imposing order on—the preexisting heterotopia visible in Sloan's images. The heterogeneity of life on Sloan's tenement rooftops would have been anathema to the magazine's middle-class readers. As architectural historian Elizabeth Cromley has shown, the rooftops of grander, uptown apartment buildings no longer had a "double identity as service spaces [for the servants] and as terraces and viewing platforms" for the residents. With the installation of mechanical drying equipment in their basements and the introduction of elevator access to the roof, apartment roofs had been purified by the 1890s into a solely recreational space, embellished with fancy pergolas or gazebos. In addition to the mixing of work with play, Sloan's tenement rooftop scenes reveal a disturbing intermingling of the sexes. In the etching Love on the Roof, the chimney stacks and laundry lines provide a haven for two, presumably adulterous, lovers, while in Roofs, Summer Night the mothers, fathers, and children of numerous families are strewn across the tar, their lack of privacy emphasized by the voyeuristic gaze of the man on the right. Bourgeois reformers viewed such outdoor scenes of heterosocial intermixing in moralistic terms, as perversions of a "healthy," that is, indoor, domestic life. The leading campaigner against tenement abuses, Jacob Riis, described with horror the "dirty crowds camping on the roof" on hot summer nights, which variously included naked, unwashed immigrant children, boys flying kites in defiance of "police regulations," "young men and girls court[ing] and pass[ing] the growler" (pails of beer), and "men and women [lying] in restless, sweltering rows, panting for air and sleep." For Riis and other reformers, such heterotopian scenes were merely indicators of a deeper social and sanitary problem: namely, the overcrowded and underventilated
rooms of the tenement itself, which forced immigrant family life not only up onto the rooftops but also out into the city’s streets, parks, beaches, and riverfronts.

Unencumbered by such moral reservations, Sloan embraced what he called “the roof life of the Metropolis”—as he did its street life—as a means to capture the human and aesthetic qualities of the urban everyday, a defining commitment of the Ashcan School. His images of this heterotopia do, to be sure, betray a utopian longing that distinguishes them from his better-known depictions of the city at street level. Whereas Sloan’s working-class New Yorkers are subjected as pedestrians to the commercial allure of shop window displays and movie theater signs or to the class humiliations inflicted by conspicuous displays of wealth on Fifth Avenue (Gray and Brass, 1907), as roof dwellers they appear to find refuge from commercialism, from distinctions of class, gender, and ethnicity, and from bourgeois notions of propriety. Sloan’s espousal of socialism in 1910, combined with his feelings of loneliness in the city, may have led him to idealize the rooftop as a kind of communal space, where immigrant families could forge bonds of intimacy (Roofs, Summer Night) or working women could share stories as they dried their hair in the sun (Sunday, Women Drying Their Hair, 1912). But these images were also informed by his direct observations, first from his apartment window on the edge of the Tenderloin, and then, after 1911, from his eleventh-floor studio in Greenwich Village, which afforded unobstructed views of the city’s rooftops below. His etchings and paintings thus document an actually existing, heterotopian space of sociability that contrasts radically with the more regulated and privatized use of rooftops in New York today.

Notes


† Sloan quoted in Mary Fanton Roberts, “John Sloan: His Art and Its Inspiration,” Touchstone 4 (February 1919): 362; Roberts recounted these words “some years” later (362).

5 Elizabeth Collins Cromley, Alone Together: A History of New York’s Early Apartments (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), 154; see also 118, 152.


Æ To be sure, Sloan was observing tenements in the Tenderloin and Greenwich Village, neighborhoods that were less deprived than those Riis described and photographed.

û On Sloan’s socialism, which he insisted influenced only his illustrations for political publications such as the Masses, see Rebecca Zurier, Robert W. Snyder, and Virginia M. Mecklenburg, Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 110. On his “envy” for the community and solidarity of working-class neighborhoods, see Zurier, Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2006), 298; see also 266, 294, 296.

û Leslie Kaufman documents the recent tendencies to keep doors to the roof locked (partly out of post-9/11 security concerns) and to sell roof rights as private patios or cabanas or for cellphone tower space; “In Tanning Circles, the Roof Is Becoming History,” New York Times, August 4, 2007, B1.
Case Study Utopia and Architectural Photography

Julius Shulman’s 1960 photograph of architect Pierre Koenig’s Case Study House #22 is one of the most famous architectural photographs of the twentieth century, embodying the ideals of postwar optimism and virtuoso design. Nearly all the published commentary on the photograph positions it as a utopian image that depicts the promise of California lifestyles and of architectural modernism for residential applications. Shulman himself wrote that the photograph was intended, in part, to help “alleviate the public’s fear of the structural capabilities of modern architecture.” It was a photograph made, like many others created by Shulman and his contemporaries such as Ezra Stoller, Maynard Parker, and the Chicago firm of Hedrich Blessing, to sell a building to a client, an architect to potential future clients, and architectural modernism to the general public. The Case Study House program, sponsored by Arts + Architecture magazine between 1945 and 1966, might itself be cast as a utopian venture that sought to bring the virtues of clean, well-ordered, healthy, and prosperous lifestyles engendered by the new architecture to the masses—a public imagined by the architectural, building, and lending communities as largely white, middle class, and settled in or moving to suburbia. The very name of the project—Case Study Houses—evokes notions about the purity of scientific research that in turn conjure utopian visions of a high-tech future governed by pure knowledge.

Yet “utopia”—along with its negative corollary, “dystopia”—is a complex term whose definition and meaning remain in flux. Popular notions of spatial utopias tend toward futuristic orientations and hold the dreamlike promise of improved lives in optimistically conceived environments that hover just beyond the horizon and promise fulfillment, order, and happiness. Utopias are generally intended to represent a totality since they cannot be imagined as incomplete or partial, and, as such, they are necessarily meant to be unambiguous. Yet they can also function as a synecdoche, a symbolic fragment that stands for or is seen as a totality. Fredric Jameson, whose sweeping, detailed analysis of utopia as a literary form begins with Thomas More’s Utopia of 1516 and ends with works of twentieth-century science fiction, informs his readers that “Utopia has always been a political issue,” one that is structurally ambiguous. For Jameson as for some other scholars of the subject, utopia is always the container of ideological content. And dystopia, Jameson reminds us, is a term only recently coined, a product—tellingly—of the Cold War era, that is essentially a “mass-cultural and ideological phenomenon” likewise fraught with “virulent contradictions.” Dystopias might best be understood not as anti-utopias but as maintaining a relationship to time, considering the present within the framework of possible futures that acknowledge and account for the contingencies of present-day social, economic, political, and cultural logics.

Keeping these definitions in mind, I propose that Shulman’s photograph of Case Study House #22 is a complex representation that straddles the dialectical realms of the utopian and dystopian. As an inherently ideological image—with an aesthetic veil that renders the political content of its subject matter nearly invisible and therefore naturalizes it—the photograph serves as a portal for the consideration of both utopia and dystopia as they intersect with the spatial realms of city, suburb, and house in the second half of the twentieth century.
Shulman's photograph is in many respects heroic. It is an arresting image that embodies the hallmarks of Shulman's artistic skills in its elegant and dynamic composition, the dramatic and technically skillful manipulation of light, and the artistic staging of models and artifacts. It aims to convey a postwar utopia, predicated on assumptions about the control of both urban and residential space that are suggested by the visual command of the city afforded the occupants of the house, by the apparently prosperous lives of the well-dressed women (models hired for the photo shoot), and the affluence indicated by the attributes of this custom-designed home with its glass walls, indoor-outdoor connections, and carefully appointed interior space.

But considering that Shulman was hired to make photographs that would showcase the house, the image he produced—at least the one that became the most famous representation of the house—hardly illustrates the residence. The photograph reveals only the corner of the living room interior, the structural frame that holds the floor-to-ceiling glass walls and sliding-glass windows, the eaves of the roof that extend beyond the walls, and an enticing glimpse of the substructure that supports the house. A chaise lounge and two potted plants occupy the terrace in the foreground, the angle and striations of the chair mirroring the lines of the beams that support the roof projecting over the city below and that occupy the upper third of the image. Los Angeles's grid of lights twinkle below the house, which seems to hover magically at the edge of a cliff. Without drawings of the plan or elevations or more photographs, it is impossible to understand the form of the house itself. Shulman created a suite of photographs of the house—some in color, and the majority do a far better job than this one does of describing its spaces and forms—yet the image reproduced here remains the iconic photo of the residence.

Instead of depicting the house, it serves as a pictorial prompt for a set of associations that Shulman and Pierre Koenig (perhaps unconsciously) expected viewers would assemble in their imaginations. The image functions as a utopian synecdoche, a part that refers not only to the whole of the house but also to an entire lifestyle, one inhabited by the white, clean, well-dressed, upper-middle-class occupants—they could not
be otherwise in this house in 1960—whose commanding view of the city affords them the visual authority associated with the control of space itself. This was the world into which viewers projected themselves and to which Shulman, Koenig, and the architecture and building industries hoped they would aspire. Knowing or not, Shulman created a picture that contributed to the enormous corpus of postwar house imagery whose iconography of white privilege was so pervasive that it became almost invisible, at least in the sense that it went largely unquestioned.

*Case Study House #22,* then, positions the house as both a frame and a lens. It simultaneously frames and filters an intended utopian view of twentieth-century domesticity and of the city over which the house hovers, a city that viewers were meant to see as the embodiment of economic potential, personal freedoms, and sparkling glamour. Like many of the architectural photographs created by his contemporaries, Shulman carefully staged the photograph of *Case Study House #22* to create the optimal balance between reality and a believable fiction, one that pertained to the architecture itself as much as to the unknown lives of those depicted in the photograph and to the city that stretched out below them. For it must be admitted that the city and its lights are equally the subject of this photograph. The house’s architect, Pierre Koenig, wrote that he designed the house “so that Los Angeles becomes an extension of the house and vice-versa. The house is just a part of the city.” But is it really?

The photo depicts these well-groomed women, whom we are meant to see as guests and/or occupants of the house, not as merged with the city but as isolated from it, a city that was already characterized in 1960 by uncontrolled and largely unregulated growth. Los Angeles of 1960 was a city—like many others at the time—of urban tensions, urban renewal, and turbulent social change. The segregated city above which the two women perch was one in which racial and ethnic divisions were becoming spatialized—literally concretized—through the planning and construction of massive freeways that divided the city and reinforced existing lines of segregation, in which South Los Angeles (the view in the photograph looks to the south) became increasingly the local ion of poverty and race-related violence.

For twenty-first-century viewers, Shulman also created a view that now simultaneously conjures dystopian associations of the Los Angeles we know through a set of varied lenses. One can hardly look at this photograph today without thinking of the Watts Riots of 1965 that sprang from a deep well of anger and frustration on the part of blacks who had experienced decades of discrimination. The years 1958 and 1961 bracket the struggles over land at Chavez Ravine that resulted in the displacement and erasure of a vital community of Latino/a residents in favor of the construction of Dodger Stadium, a contest over urban space well known to scholars who study spatial (in)justice. Los Angeles was a city that by 1960 had become the third-largest urban area in the United States, and that by 1990 was described by Mike Davis, in his landmark publication *City of Quartz,* as “Fortress L.A.” But even by 1960, Los Angeles was a city renowned for its haves and have-nots and its fragile ecology that echoes the precarious balance of *Case Study House #22* on its equally fragile Hollywood Hills site. It is telling that the lower center portion of Shulman’s photograph includes a rocky outcropping that seems to intersect with and almost to support the structural system of the house as it juts beyond the hillside’s edge. Cast in deep shadow, the outcropping suggests the unstable underbelly of California’s seismically active landscape, here literally rendered in darkness as if to visually suppress what all Californians daily seek to forget: that their world can, in an instant, become the topic of a disaster feed on international news loops.
Notes


4 Ibid., 198, 200, 292.

5 Indeed, as Michael Stern has written, "The milieu depicted in Shulman's photographs is a beautiful one, in which the people are attractive and buildings are exquisitely groomed and flawlessly framed." Stern and Hess, Julius Shulman: Palm Springs, 11.


Anthony Alofsin

Broadacre City—Ideal and Nemesis

Depending on the viewer's frame of reference, Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City can appear as either a utopia or a dystopia. Some critics see Wright's concept of living in the country in a small, controlled settlement as the evil seed that spawned America's sprawling suburbs. Others see a prescient forerunner of the pared-down sustainable life that will be mandatory in the twenty-first century. Scrutiny of the core concepts of Wright's Broadacre City shows how both positions coexist, as well as Wright's own ambiguity about the project, which left it in a perpetual limbo.¹

Wright’s Broadacre City synopsized his critique of modern life. He started to conceptualize the project immediately after the stock market crash of 1929 and articulated the theory behind Broadacre City in his book The Disappearing City of 1932. The concept took physical form in the midst of the Depression in a twelve-by-twelve-foot, three-dimensional model built in 1934–35. Broadacre City was first presented to the public in an exhibition at Rockefeller Center on April 15, 1935, with the big model, ten smaller collateral models, and numerous placards explaining its components and principles.²

Wright envisioned Broadacre City as a four-square-mile settlement for 1,400 families. Highways and feeder roads were organized to maximize convenience in getting to work and leisure activities and to provide safety. Standard elements of the settlement included farms “correlated” with production and sales; small-scale, nonpolluting factories; decentralized schools; monorails; a controlled traffic system with separation of classes of vehicular traffic; warehouses incorporated into highway structures; and cost-saving houses, described as “generally of prefabricated units,” with much glass, "roofless rooms," and rooftop gardens. Residents could choose among a variety of dwelling types, and each family would have its own acre of land. The guiding philosophy—and
a prefiguration of the current trend of sustainability—was small is good: “small farms, small factories, small homes for industry, small schools and small laborato-
ries on home grounds, all working in coordination.” Although Wright attacked
skyscrapers as the bane of urban life, he thought they had a place as singular
objects in the landscape of Broadacre City, where his design “presupposes that the
city is going to the country” and that the “country” would consist of four sections
of land on which “the hills come down to the plains and a river flows down and
across the plain.” Furthermore, Broadacre City settlements were to extend through-
out the nation. Because every man, woman, and child deserved to own land as
long as they used it or lived on it, and every adult, Wright argued, was entitled to
own at least one automobile, many Broadacre Cities would be required.

Broadacre City shared with other modernist visions a set of beliefs in rational
solutions to problems of planning. These included a call for central administration,
an emphasis on transportation networks, a focus on the machine as a metaphor
for industrial technology, and the provision of discrete zones for leisure and work
activities. While most European solutions in the 1920s and 1930s focused on
Zeilenbau—block housing laid out in lines—Wright used multiple building types,
with emphasis on detached residences, in a treatment of the landscape that appears
romantic compared with the strict rationalism of European efforts. In marked
contrast to the planning schemes of Le Corbusier, for example, Wright’s vision
appeared at the outset pointedly political and social in emphasis. Broadacre City
seemed to serve a one-class system. There was no proletariat or upper middle class,
only an enlightened democratic throng, directed by the only aristocrat, the archi-
tect, in a system that might be called an “architocracy.” But was Broadacre City a
plan for real action, a viable alternative to American settlements, or a fragment of
rhetoric that Wright doggedly developed as a social critique over the last twenty-
five years of his career?

A sampling of the early critical response and of Wright’s replies sheds light on
the ambiguous position the project would assume. Stephen Alexander, writing in
the socialist journal New Masses, pointed to the Broadacre City model as the most
important object in the 1935 Rockefeller Center exhibition. Wright, he opined, was
“one of the most important forces in progressive American architectural thought”
because his creativity had “driven him forward by the inner logic of his craft to an
anti-capitalist position,” seeing the fundamental problems of contemporary archi-
tecture as socioeconomic. After offering this lofty assessment, however, Alexander
cited basic philosophical and political deficiencies: Wright’s understanding of the
nature of social forces, in his view, was a confused and naive combination of “ado-
lescent idealism” and Wellesian science fiction. Wright appeared not to understand
the means of obtaining the first principles of free use of the ground, ownership
of utilities, government by the people, and fair subsistence for everyone. Without
immediate political action, a mere drawing of blueprints for an ideal society made
the project irrelevant and ludicrous. A practical solution would not jettison but use
existing large-scale economic development for immediate needs while planning for
a gradual modification toward a decentralized economy. According to Alexander,
the major value of Wright’s project lay in its pointing out of the need to reject
capitalism and to install a socialist society as the primary basis for progressive
architectural development.

Wright fought back, though feebly, in the next issue of the New Masses.
Acknowledging that Broadacre City proposed an anticapitalistic way of living, he
maintained that it was also “anti-Communist” and “anti-socialistic.” Broadacre
City, he argued, was intended to supplant a political philosophy by championing "creative individuality." Wright further retreated from any existing political alignment by offering his project as "only a preliminary study [of decentralization] for a better effort" in a search for freedom: "That better effort was all Broadacres was intended to be; and that, largely for myself." Idealistic dreaming and reverie, according to Wright, not a political hard line, was necessary. He concluded with the wistful statement that if "the whole world were not quite so callous and the people in it not utterly sophisticated. Then, something besides war might be inevitable and natural enough to happen soon."

Wright took his plea for Broadacre City to the public airways, preparing a script for a radio broadcast in April 1935. In it, he promoted his concept as a means of bringing "the Arts, Agriculture, and Industry into one harmonious whole." Of particular note was Wright's perception that the "psychological moment" had arrived in which the models of the future, as seen in his Broadacre City, had become a reality of the present. Belief in the "psychological moment" of change was fundamental to pushing forward a new concept of living and working on the land. Without this conviction, Wright would have lacked the passion to promote Broadacre City for the next two decades.

Wright's inability to acknowledge political reality provided further grist for his critics. In 1938 art historian Meyer Schapiro assailed Broadacre City's argument in the Partisan Review for ignoring the problems of class and power: the whole concept was abhorrent.
on the premise of idealism itself, that consciousness determines social being, which led both Wright and Corbusier into delusions. If the latter invoked "geometry" before a "pathetic apology" for a chapter on finance and realization, the former expounded on "architecture as organic life" before sketching a desultory view of the poor man in desolation. Both modernists were guilty of the same faults. Kantorowich saw in them a lack of practicality combined with political backsliding and personal arrogance. In Wright’s views as expressed in his exhibition brochure in New York City, the critic also saw a social demagoguery of a type that could be associated with the rise of fascism.

Until his death in 1959, Wright perpetuated the ambiguous status of Broadacre City as a realistic model for a replacement of urban development and also an idealist piece of rhetoric. On one hand, he elaborated it in detail, adding projects to the model and repeating and expanding its theoretical statements in his writings. On the other, he never adequately responded to attacks on the political naiveté of the venture, thus giving credence to the view that his claims were bluster. Despite its limbo, the project remains relevant for future considerations as landscape urbanism and fresh ways of looking at the city emerge in the early twenty-first century. In the built environment, smaller, as Wright claimed, may be better.

Notes

From BioArt to BioDesign

What if Chicago-based bioartist Eduardo Kac’s Alba, a rabbit made of a genetically engineered green-fluorescing protein, were not a bunny but a furry room—say, your bedroom—designed by the Spanish “genetic architect” Alberto Estévez? Walls of “whatever forms, textures, and colors one may choose,” with “very long, silky hair in bright silver shades or in iridescent red,” would be “accomplished without sacrificing any animal—just the opposite, by creating the animal!” Estévez explains, “There will be no need for painting and repainting the walls,” and then asks in a recent essay, “Pure utopia or near reality?” His writing and lectures put forward his clear belief that genetic architecture is both.¹

Dream even bigger, as New York–based architects Matthias Hollwich and Marc Kushner have done in their video Econic Design (2008). They imagine how genetic engineering technologies, applied to rapacious kudzu vines, might capture energy from photosynthesis and allow cities like Atlanta to move off the grid in the twenty-second century. This city of the future, which they call MTreePOLIS, is so far off the grid that our rectangular urban infrastructure of skyscrapers and streets is pulled apart and replaced by a very ungridlike “biogrid.”² The vines function simultaneously as energy source, urban playscape, and social unifier. “No longer . . . segregated urban and suburban enclaves,” nor a “city of simple above and below,” the biogrid permeates these previously distinct zones and empowers “citizens to reclaim the urban scene in its entirety.” Econic Design dramatizes how “technology becomes nature,” yet in so doing obliterates nature as we know and experience it today. Nongenetically engineered plants such as trees and grass disappear at the onset of the genetically altered kudzu and “enhanced bio-renewable moss,” the latter of which effectively turns the concrete jungle into a park where podcasts zoom amid strolling pedestrians.³
Hollwich and Kushner state with matter-of-fact irony their rationale for turning to
genetic technologies to solve the current energy crisis. "The destruction of the world's
ecosystem and the imminent end of modern society as we know it is a foregone conclu-
sion. . . . Melting ice-caps will not change human nature and environmental sensitivity
will persist to be subservient to the thrill of short-term returns," they write. Yet "there
is good reason to believe that the human tendency for environmental manipulation
will ultimately bring ecological salvation." Without clarifying those good reasons, they
extend their techno-optimism into the social realm: "Our compulsion for more control
and better innovation suggests a future within which selfish shortsightedness inadver-
tently triggers an ecological and social utopia."4

Hollwich told me about meeting genomics researcher Craig Venter—cofounder
and CEO of the company Synthetic Genomics—at a 2008 conference in California.5
Venter is currently working on patenting a versatile synthetic genome, whose lengthy
amino acid sequence was first created on a computer, then assembled at a biotechnol-
gy company that synthesizes DNA, and finally inserted into a bacterial cell in May
2010. The cell accepted the genome and began producing the proteins coded for by
the synthetic genome.6 Venter's accomplishment—not of creating life, only mimicking
it—far surpasses that of CalTech computer scientist and bioengineer Paul Rothemund,
whose DNA Origami (2004–5) models were on display at the Museum of Modern
Rothemund also used computers to design DNA strands that, when synthesized and
placed in a test tube of saltwater, chemically bonded at predetermined points with a
strand of viral DNA to "self-assemble" into nano happy faces (likely meant to assuage
any fears viewers might have).7 Inclusion in the exhibition was surely not for this blasé
artistic result but rather for Rothemund's highly suggestive technological process,
which curator Paola Antonelli's wall text stated could "come together in dynamic
objects and buildings."

Just six years after Rothemund made his happy faces, Venter showed that this latter
process can produce synthetic bioproducts, and schools of architecture and design
are encouraging students to explore the trend toward "semi-living architecture."
Rothemund had stated his overarching goal in a 2007 talk called "Casting Spells with
DNA." "What we really want to do in the end is learn how to program self-assembly
so that we can build anything, right? We want to be able to build technological arti-
facts that are maybe good for the world," he asserted. "We want to learn how to build
biological artifacts, like people and whales and trees, and if it's the case that we can
reach that level of complexity, if our ability to program molecules gets to be that good,
then that will truly be magic."8 His process and vision resemble those of Estève, who
defines genetic architecture as "the fusion of cybernetic-digital resources with genetics,
to continuously join the zeros and ones from the architectural [computer] drawing
with those from the robotized manipulation of DNA."9
Estévez is not a scientist, nor is he seriously collaborating with a geneticist or bioengineer on working through the fantastic difficulties of his mission, were real cells and tissues actually to become involved. He and several colleagues point to the work of Australian artists Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr as living prototypes for what genetic architecture will be, despite the fact that the artists' intentions run counter to the architects' goals.10 Catts and Zurr's Victimless Leather, also on display at Design and the Elastic Mind, was a "semi-living" miniature coat about two inches tall, grown in vitro through tissue-engineering processes and kept alive for about five weeks at MoMA with biofluid nutrient fluid and a peristaltic pump. A biodegradable polymer scaffold in the shape of the stylish jacket was created by the artists and seeded with connective and bone cells from a mouse, which grew over the scaffold and then continued beyond until one arm was almost falling off and the incubator was clogged. Curator Antonelli deemed these traits worthy of death; with the artists' permission, she ceremoniously acted as executioner.11

In the caption at MoMA, the artists were quoted as stating that if we consumers surround ourselves with "manufactured and living, growing entities," we will "begin to take a more responsible attitude toward our environment and curb our destructive consumerism."12 Ponder the implications of that statement as though you are part of an ongoing performance piece Catts and Zurr are initiating, and which Antonelli presented at face value to viewers in the context of her exhibition. Would you buy such a coat for your newborn and simply grow the coat along with your child, so that only one coat is needed for life? Would the coat have a portable IV system that slips into a waterproof liner pocket when you wear it outside, assuming it is plugged in all the time at home? Could you purchase health insurance or a fifty-year warranty that allows annual stylish alterations at the "genetic design laboratory"? What would this cost?

Coats, wallcoverings, houses, cities: perhaps you will immediately invest in one of the companies that produces tissue culture media, the bionutrient fluid that keeps such products alive. But don't look past the sterile tubes and glass vial interiors, for they form tissue-engineered biodesign's necessary contextual infrastructure. For MEtreePOLIS, Atlanta's city council might decide it needs a sterile terrorist-proof glass dome over the city, such as Buckminster Fuller and Shoji Sadao proposed for Manhattan about 1960. Also, don't presume that biodesigns will be made of "victimless leather," for although the life and death of connective and bone cells of a mouse on a polymer scaffold may not cause you to lose sleep, the integral red fluid that keeps tissue-engineered entities alive is made in part from the serum of a calf fetus. Tissue culture media usually consists of 10 percent fetal calf serum, a much more sensitive issue, since mother and calf must die at the slaughterhouse to obtain it.13 Even for genetically engineered bioproducts, problems of nutrient supply, waste removal,
disease prevention and cure still apply. Scale, too, is absolutely critical to the theory and practice of biodesign, yet it is little mentioned by its promoters.

Finally, is it really likely that selfish shortsightedness will inadvertently lead to an ecological and social utopia? Bioartists seem more willing than biodesigners to discuss the ethics of domination and exploitation that inhere to the trend of the "biologicalisation of our world." For example, Catts and Zurr contributed the essay "Growing Semi-Living Structures" to a special 2008 issue of Architectural Design in which they stressed that their goal as artists is to question and subvert these technologies and place the complex ethical dilemmas of biodesign before their viewers. Despite these statements, it appears that none of the architects or designers who uphold their bioart as a prototype for biodesign has seriously engaged with their critical intent or with the ethical problems.

Catts and Zurr challenge the exportation of Western consumerism and biotechnologies as an ongoing form of imperialism, since these are based in and foster exploitation of other living beings, including other species as well as human labor. In their essay "Are the Semi-Living Semi-Good or Semi-Evil?" they describe the prevailing ideological context of biotechnology as imperialistic in light of racist and sexist practices they see on display in the "global war on terror," where a variety of others are targeted for exclusion. Because "the form and the application" of biotechnologies "will be determined by the prevailing ideologies that develop and control the technology," they write, only if a new ideology of cooperation rather than domination and control prevails is there hope for our interactions with the living and the "semi-living." They state that their own artistic "motives are based in exposing social hypocrisies in regard to what is natural and also shifting definitions of the 'other.' If we are not able to be compassionate for differences in our own species," as is so evident now and in past history, "will the existence of the Semi-Living or a collaborative symbiotic collection of cells enable us, even a little bit, to present a mirror of our absurdities?" These questions call for real change in human perception and behavior, change in the direction of respect and cooperation rather than selfishness and competition, as a necessary prerequisite to biodesign. Without these, one biodesigner's utopia will be intricately intertwined with another being's dystopia.
Notes


† Matthias Hollwich and Marc Kushner, "METreePOLIS," Architectural Design 80, no. 6 (November 2010): 59.

† Ibid.

5 They talked at the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference; Hollwich also presented his ideas of iconic design at TEDxAtlanta on January 26, 2010; see http://tedxatlanta.com/videos/01262010-repurpose/matthias-hollwich/.


ũ Estévez, "Biomorphic Architecture," 78.


12 Paola Antonelli, Design and the Elastic Mind (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008), caption at 115, and exhibition wall text. Catts and Zurr created the Tissue Culture & Art Project through SymbioticA, the Art and Science Collaborative Research Laboratory, School of Anatomy and Human Biology, University of Western Australia, Perth. The wall text dates the original Victimless Leather prototype to 2004, but the version on display was created in 2008, since it died five weeks into the show.


29 American Art
Susan Cross

Revolutionary Gardens

When Thomas More described Utopia in the sixteenth century, he imagined the ideal, egalitarian society as an island set apart from other nations. Over the centuries, many social experiments—from Charles Fourier's phalanstères to Josef Stalin's vision for a communist Russia—have attempted to make utopia real. Most of these have implemented radical political and philosophical beliefs in small, sequestered colonies at a remove from the rest of society. Most have also proven to be short-lived and subsequently dismissed as the fantasies of wishful thinkers or condemned as authoritarian nightmares. Discussing the depreciation of the concept, Ernst Bloch in 1964 noted an important shift: at some point Utopia migrated in the popular imagination from an elsewhere existing in another place to one situated in another time, specifically, the future. In Bloch's words, Utopia could still "be there if we could only do something for it."

Many contemporary artists are not only "do[ing] something" that might help us build a better society in the future, but they are creating micro-utopias, laboratoâries that offer models of alternative ways of thinking and living now. A number of artist collectives, including Eating in Public (EIP) and the Baltimore Development Cooperative (BDC), as well as individual artists like Amy Franceschini and Fritz Haeg (based in Oahu, Hawaii, Baltimore, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, respectively) are doing so by cultivating gardens, literally planting the seeds for radical change. Their seemingly small acts of growing and sharing food—in suburban yards, vacant city lots, urban rooftops, and public parks—are challenging the status quo and questioning capitalist norms, ranging from our alienation from food production to the waste and inequality of private property. Repurposing society's underused land in order to grow healthful food in an ecologically safe manner, they are doing more than planting vegetable gardens; they are creating a catalyst for social, economic, and political transformation.
Many utopian proposals, beginning with More’s and continuing through the best known of nineteenth-century America such as the Shakers and the Transcendentalists of Brook Farm, have been tied to an agrarian ideal. These utopian thinkers saw that a communal, agriculture-based lifestyle allowed for self-sufficiency, independence from the multiplying evils of industry, and a close relationship to nature. The goals of these inspirational predecessors were not so different from those of many modern-day artists. What sets these contemporary artists apart is their greater engagement with the population at large and their work in public space.

In 2003 Eating in Public (a collaboration between Gaye Chan and Nandita Sharma) planted twenty papaya plants on a small strip of public land between a sidewalk and a fenced-in lake near their home in Hawaii. They intended for others to help tend the plants and also partake in their produce. They posted a sign that said:

*These papaya plants have been planted here for everyone. When they bear fruit, in about a year, you are welcome to pick them as you need. We will return to feed the plants with organic fertilizer once a month. Please feel free to water and weed. Do not use chemical weed killers as this will poison the fruits and those that eat them.*

*The Diggers*

The seventeenth-century Diggers invoked by EIP were agrarians and radical thinkers who protested the loss of the commons in the wake of the English civil wars and subsequent acts of enclosure. Their manifesto called for the peaceful return of all land to the people and declared their intent to “dig up, manure, and sow corn” on the waste land in order to “work and eat together, making the Earth a Common Treasury.” For several months in 1649 the Diggers occupied a hill in Surrey and planted crops. Although they were attacked and suppressed by government forces and angry landowners, several Digger colonies sprang up in other towns over the next two years, and the movement continues to inspire challenges to injustices linked to the loss of communal land and the wasted resources of much privately owned property.

Like the original Diggers, EIP planted papayas on public land to question the true meaning of “public” and to restore the idea of the commons—land truly communally owned and not simply sanctioned by the state for limited public use. Perhaps not surprisingly, EIP’s plants were eventually cut down by the “authorities.” The restrictions placed on individual behavior in public space establishes it, in the words of EIP, as “a zone of criminality” for a part of the public who attempts to use it for basic human activities necessary for subsistence—such as sleeping, eating, and growing food—now confined to private space. As early as 538 the Roman emperor Justinian codified the idea that certain crucial resources—the air, the water, including the shore—belonged to all. But today the commons is unrecognized and undefended by its inheritors: indeed, it is often the receptacle for much of the waste produced by industry and
private interests. The lake next to EIP’s papayas, for example, is now polluted, and its fence bars "trespassers" from enjoying its views or its fish. Moved in response to EIP’s garden intervention, the fence now stands directly over the stumps of EIP’s papayas.3

The three artists behind the Baltimore Development Cooperative share a similar goal to address "the absurdity of private property" and, specifically, the abandonment of property throughout the poorer, largely African American neighborhoods in Baltimore. Wanting to reclaim the vacant space causing so much blight, in 2007 Scott Berzofsky, Dane Nester, and Nicholas Wisniewski created a public art project in East Baltimore that is both community garden and social space. Squatting on formerly unused land, these artist-activists have engaged members of the neighboring community to help sow, seed, water, and weed the garden, and then to share the bounty, participating in communal meals and activities such as cooking classes. BDC emphasizes the democratic principles behind Participation Park: all the people involved are expected to be part of the political process that shapes what it is now and what it will become. The artists' reluctance to articulate a single image or goal for the garden brings to mind Bloch's notion that Utopia is not a fixed ideal but one continually changing in form in relation to social conditions—much as the way a garden responds to local climate and soil. When asked why the garden is an appropriate vehicle for BDC's larger ideas about social justice, Berzofsky answered, "A garden is always incomplete, it's always a work in progress, which is similar to . . . the conditions of democracy."4

Likewise, for Franceschini, gardening can be political. Her Victory Gardens project was inspired by the gardening campaigns initiated by the U.S. government during World Wars I and II. Every household, including the White House, was encouraged to grow its own vegetables to support the war effort. Cities around the nation participated. In San Francisco, more than 250 plots were planted in Golden Gate Park, and a garden was sown on the lawn in front of City Hall. Inspired by the astounding efficacy of the wartime Victory Gardens (in 1943, 20 million gardens were producing 8 million tons of food and 41 percent of the vegetables consumed in the nation), Franceschini formulated a "utopian proposal" for San Francisco in 2006. It began with a pilot project involving the donation of gardens (seeds, labor, and instruction) to three families who represented the diversity of the city's residents and whose homes were in different climatic zones. The success of those first gardens led to a network of urban food producers—made possible with city support—and in 2009 culminated in the planting of a communal garden in front of City Hall, its produce given to a local food bank. Resurrecting these historic garden models, Franceschini hoped to redefine what victory means now: "political action, education, community involvement, and independence from corporate food systems."5

Fritz Haeg also appears to be challenging value systems that have diverged from those embedded in the garden with his ongoing project entitled Edible Estates. Called an "attack on the front lawn," the artist's works transform decorative, grassy, pesticide-laden suburban yards into useful fruit, vegetable, and herb gardens that invite community engagement. Since 2005 Haeg has created ten gardens in collaboration with homeowners as well as museums, a public housing project, and a community center in places as diverse as Kansas, New Jersey, California, and London. The artist pushes us to rethink the iconic American lawn, a piece of private property that is also very public—the cookie-cutter face most homeowners show the world. Yet it is usually a blank no-man's-land, used by neither the owner nor the community. Harking back to European manor houses of the seventeenth century, the lawn is and was a sign of prosperity, evidence that the owner could afford to let land go unplanted. In postwar America, the yard announced the growing wealth and sophistication of the middle
class. Strangely, though, the prescribed lawns that maintain the order and unity of the street and community also keep inhabitants separated—sequestered inside or in the backyard. Most of the participants in Haeg’s *Edible Estates* have remarked that they have never known their neighbors better—their gardens fostering interaction as well as providing shared vegetables. Although we have been conditioned to think of a well-manicured lawn as a visually pleasing site, a standard of our country’s health, in many ways it is no less wasteful than the vacant lot transformed by the Baltimore Development Cooperative.⁶

Although these artist-gardeners have varying strategies and goals, the form of action and resistance they have chosen, that is, the garden, in which investment in the present leads to gains in the future both immediate and long term, is an apt model for any number of utopian efforts. The fact that many plants can propagate on their own—one strawberry plant spawning an entire bed, for example—mimics the potential for the spread of ideas and actions initiated by artists and other utopian thinkers. It is important to note as well, as Eating in Public asserts, that the social relations these works advocate and provoke occur each time someone engages with them—grounding them in the here and now as well as in the future: the passersby realizing that a gift economy is a possible alternative to capitalism, the city kids learning not only that they can grow their own carrots but that they can create their own idea of community, the politician finding success in advocating an unlikely idea, and the suburban urban neighbor overcoming a lifetime of conditioned responses to appreciate that the yard next door isn’t mown.

**Notes**


† For more information on Eating in Public, see www.nomoola.com in addition to creativetime.org /programs/archive/2010/summit/WP/2010/10/10/eating-in-public/.

‡ See www.baltimoredevelopmentco-op.org, especially “Interview with Amy Franceschini.”
