

Urban utopia



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Matt Torres Dr. Cay Hehner Modern New York November 1, 2012 Research Paper The history of the urban utopia arose when theorists and city planners decided that a radical reconstruction of their cities (Venturi 4) was needed.

There are problems that arose in cities of every generation and these problems have sparked the minds of the greatest thinkers, planner, architects, and theorists of the 19th century. These were the first attempts at correcting the problems that we deal with today. Problems such as dealing with growth, dealing with nature, and dealing with civilization.

Throughout the history of the city, it seems as though some of these basic principles have been forgotten. However, we can look towards the work of Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier, who were some of the most dominant architectural thinkers who advanced the field of urban-conceptual thought into places it had never been before. The radical thinker, known as Sir Ebenezer Howard, is widely regarded by many to be one of the most influential urban planners of the 19th century.

His work with the English Garden City Movement led to a worldwide response about how cities will deal with a rapid increase of people. His goal was to provide comfortable cities, which had an abundance of affordable housing; arranged in ways that would incorporate nature to its fullest. His work, unlike that of Robert Moses (another influential urban planner), Frank Lloyd Wright, or Le Corbusier, focused on the people and their ability to live in cities, without sacrificing their valuable green space. Howard was born on Fore Street, in the city of London on January 29th, 1850.

He was the son of a shopkeeper and was sent away to school at a young age. He was schooled in Suffolk, then Cheshunt in Hertfordshire, and finally

completed his education at the age of 15 at Stoke Hall, Ipswich (Letchworth, para. 2). Working odd jobs out of school, he was eventually persuaded to go to the US at the age of 21. Around the time he came to America, he witnessed the American re-growth and recovery from the Great Fire of 1871...a fire which destroyed most of the central business district (Letchworth para. 5).

His views with how America planned to rebuild in this small city of Chicago led him to constantly be fascinated with this aspect of growth in the city. Ebenezer Howard had specific ideas of how future cities could deal with growth, and a rapid influx of people. He came up with The Garden City under the belief that it will be revolutionary in itself, like the early locomotive, capable of great improvement (Venturi 27). His Garden City grew out of the belief that centralization was the answer; a society where poverty and unemployment are unknown ... where) everyone receives an equal salary (Venturi 33). These ideas came to fruition when Howard read the bestseller *Looking Backward*, by Edward Bellamy, about a man who slept from 1887 to 1900 - only to wake up and find himself in a new society where industry regrouped into a cooperative trust ... (and) competition is replaced by centralized planning. Later, Howard published his *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, where he outlined his idea of the ideal utopian society. This Garden City was to be an ideal urban society of Three Magnets.

It was created as a means of superseding capitalism and creating a civilization based on cooperation (Venturi 24). It represented a synthesis of town (city) and country, (two of the Magnets) where the town offered excitement, high wages, and employment, but also high prices and poor

living conditions; the country ... offers physical space, but is also backward and “no fun”. It was a middle ground between two extremes and had the qualities of being compact, efficient, healthful, and beautiful all at the same time. The city wasn't without its flaws though.

The third Magnet seemed the hardest to come by. It was the pinnacle of all of his work; that Garden City, whose promise of a better life would be the basis and reason why people would be drawn away from the urban centers and into a new civilization (Venturi 39). Also, Howard doubted the practicality of extreme centralization (Venturi 35); and even if it did work, he denied its desirability (Venturi 35). Howard questioned the inevitability of centralization, but continued to work out his own justification of what he learned from reading *Looking Backward*.

The rest of his life was allocated to his stenography work, which offered him free time from which he could go about patiently designing that Third Magnet (Venturi 39) - despite having no formal architectural training. Frank Lloyd Wright was similar to Howard, in the sense that they both despised and wanted to change the urban fabric of the city. Wright argued that the dense utopian atmosphere of the modern city offered no room for individuality. Therefore, he developed Broadacres, which took decentralization beyond the small community to the individual family home (Venturi 9).

This individualism came to its height when Wright introduced his theory about Broadacres. He stated that “individuality must be founded on individual ownership” (Venturi 9). This materialized into his plan to make the city disappear, and replace it with thousands of parcels of land (similar to the Homestead Act of 1862). A minimum of an acre a person allowed for most

people to work part-time in the small factories, offices, or shops that are nestled among the farms (Venturi 9).

Since this was around the time that the car was being mass-produced, Wright introduced the idea of superhighways, which connected the scattered parcels of land in ways that weren't possible before, similar to the vision of Robert Moses. Decentralization would make it possible for everyone to live his chosen lifestyle on his own land (9), essentially giving the people their own identity and allowing them to reconcile man with nature (Venturi 164). Now for the polar opposite.

Le Corbusier, or Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, "the Parisian leader of the revolution in modern architecture" (Venturi 9), was a Frenchman who had entirely different ideas of what the future for the city held. He placed a corresponding faith in organization (Venturi 9), and argued that cities just weren't dense enough. His idea of the Radiant City could be seen as the modern thought of the city today. He proposed that geometrically arrayed skyscrapers of glass and steel would rise out of parks, gardens, and superhighways (Venturi 10).

The elite lived in luxurious high-rise apartments, while their subordinates lived in the outskirts (suburbia). It all sounds oddly familiar to the city that we are familiar with today. Whilst the idea of the city not being dense enough can be argued by most people, the concept of organization makes this one of the most ideal structures to imposing cities of the future. All three of these planners came to their own conclusions by studying previous cities and how they came to development.

The ancient Greeks had their own ideas of the city through the polis (Lecture 3). The polis was comprised of the acropolis, the enclosing city wall, the agora, residential districts, leisure and cultural areas, religious precinct, a harbor, a port, and an industrial district (Lecture 3). All of these became important parts of the cities that followed, but possibly the most important piece would be the public programs of the city. Greek rulers noticed that to keep the people under control, they had to devise ways to entertain them.

This entertainment was given either in the form of shows, plays, battles, concerts, or in general outdoor gathering space (Stadium). This is why green space is the number one concern when it comes to city planning. There must be points where we can allow a break in the urban fabric of our cities and place public zones where people can entertain themselves and others. Industrialization that took place in the 19th century created various problems for the modern day utopia.

An increase in population, increase in goods and services, redistribution of population, development of media, greater mobility, and the rise of ideology (lecture 6) spurred the thought of developing a change in shopping, domestic life, entertainment, leisure, circulation, and street life. It was a turning point since new technology was being introduced, and new techniques concerning how to manufacture materials and distribute them. Today, there are criticisms regarding the path that future cities are headed towards.

Since the 1960's, there has been skepticism towards the utopian aspirations of the early 20th century. Some say that the utopian cities are growing larger, denser, and becoming more disconnected than ever before. Superstudio poses a solution to this. By instituting a global monument, called

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The Continuous Monument, Superstudio sought out to create architecture all equally emerging from a single continuous environment (Lang 122). The disconnect associated with modern architecture today is a direct result of the Industrial Revolution and the benefits we gained from it.

It made lose our direct correlation between man and nature. Superstudio tries to address that issue in the Continuous Monument by going back to the basics of city design, the square block. It is a testimonial that architecture is the centre of the relationships of technology, sacredness, utilitarianism (Lang 122). The Continuous Monument allows us to have a better understanding of the earth around us, which we seem to have lost. Rem Koolhaas offered up another approach with his studies into the city of Lagos. Lagos is the fastest growing city in Nigeria.

It's estimated that they gain roughly 21 inhabitants per hour and the population is expected to explode to 24 million people by the year 2020. In Lagos, they've decided to ditch the urban fabric of the west and go along with an entirely new idea of utopian design. For example, Koolhaas has seen how Americans grumble about traffic and instinctively put the radio up and tune out the congestion - however, in Lagos, when the traffic comes to a halt, that's when the trading marketplace begins. This is the new direction of the city according to Koolhaas.

A city that reinvigorates the things that are wrong with it, while simultaneously turning them into overwhelming positives. It's an entirely customizable city, run and built by the inhabitants. If there is ever a need for more space in a house, the citizens simply build more rooms on top of their houses. This touches all the aspects of Frank Lloyd Wright and Ebenezer

Howard - with their emphasis on decentralized systems and influence on the individualism associated with architecture of the future. In the words of Koolhaas, " Lagos is not catching up with us.

Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos. " The urban utopia is an idea that is constantly in a state of change. As needs grow and develop, there are things that need to be reformed, re-thought, and redesigned. The ideals of Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier were once pristine candidates with functions of cities; however, with new work by Rem Koolhaas and Superstudio, we can begin to see a change in modern utopian design, and how these modern designs deal with growth that cities will be having in the next century.

Who knows, maybe we'll even begin to see something similar to the city of Lagos, applied in a westernized urban fabric such as New York City, or Chicago - cities in desperate need of a change

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