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The message of utopian architecture

THESES

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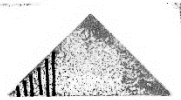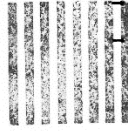
ABSTRACT

The complex phenomenon of utopia can be approached either from the perspective of the social sciences or the arts. Utopia became a negative concept due to the history of the 20th century, and it is defined as a key motive of the critics of the modern architecture in the recent architectural studies. The aim of my dissertation is to highlight the positive value of utopia's phenomenon and also to point out not only its characteristics studied by architectural historians and theoreticians, but its messages that concern the designer architects. Through the analysis of both literary and architectural utopias of different historical eras I present the connections between the critics of the era, the suggested social model and the architectural model, while raising some philosophical and ethical questions of urbanism. As the message of the utopias first I define the notion of the architectural utopia, and I highlight the role of the vision of man and the mythical aspects of the settlement and the creation of architectural space. I reflect on the nature of the relation between the urban form and the social and ideological patterns and stress the effects of the architectural instruments. I present the creative ethics methodology that can be the basis of an environmentally sensitive, ecological architectural design. Finally, through the case study of the settlement of a Hungarian eco village community I reveal the practical dilemmas of the realization of a contemporary utopia presented along the former theoretical framework.

THESES

1.
The architectural utopia is not necessarily connected with 'utopian architecture'.

2.
There is a vision of man underlying all manifestations of architecture - whether it is proclaimed or not.

3.
It is a message of the utopias, that the human act of building requires a mythic self-justification.

4.
It is also a message of the utopias that the urban forms are not direct imprints of either the patterns of the society's spatial usage or the actual ideology.

5.
The dynamics of the instruments also applies for the architectural instruments.

6.
The creative ethics methodology can be a basis of the ecological architectural design.

Family house of a community member in Nyim

Residential building in Arcosanti

1.

The architectural utopia is not necessarily connected with 'utopian architecture'.

The architectural utopia is the imprint of a belief system concerning a new, ideal social state, that is reflected on the creation of the built space. Hence, the architectural utopia does not originate from either architecture or forms: it is not defined by megastructures or formal innovations. Rather it goes hand in hand with the way of thinking behind the relations between society, environment and architecture. If concerning an architectural plan, the partakers aim to create the space in order to serve the social patterns and to relate to the environment the best way possible, their undertaking is approaching the architectural utopia and their plan is turning to be an applied utopia.

One of the members of the Nyim Eco Community and his yurt

2.

There is a vision of man underlying all manifestations of architecture - whether it is proclaimed or not.

During the design process the architect bases his spatial model on the belief, that it will fit the needs of the future users from either the practical or the aesthetic point of view. Therefor the architect always has knowledge of a certain depth about the social practices, lifestyle, attributes of the users according to the function of the space. This helps him to predict the future needs, requirements, behaviour and actions of the users that will arise during the usage of the space. As to gain total knowledge is an impossible quest, the creator of the space needs to use a model, he must create a vision of a hypothetic man, who is the utopian, abstract representation of the real user. The accuracy of this vision is bound to the success of the realization and the suitable functioning.

Central community space in Arcosanti

Central space of the San Javier mission

3.

It is a message of the utopias, that the human act of building requires a mythic self-justification.

Choay calls that characteristic of the architectural creation 'the perversion of building' mentioned in the context of Plato's Atlantis, that when the architectural space is created or expanded, it harms the natural space and takes away from it[1]. The process of the human settlement and the creation of the architectural space are justified in the utopias through mythic instruments that manifest in the transcendent, geometric order and patterns, the symbolic architectural forms and the reasoned scale of the occupied space of the settlements. The origin of the utopias goes back to the theory of the good republic, therefor the utopias concern the philosophical questions of the human existence, the ultimate goal of life and the relationship with God. One of the messages of the utopias is that the built space is inherently valuable and meaningful, and – as a particularly relevant aspect in our damaged current environment – that the architectural space we create and occupy must be of a reasonable scale.

[1] Choay, Francoise (1997) *The Rule and the Model: On the Theory of Architecture and Urbanism*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
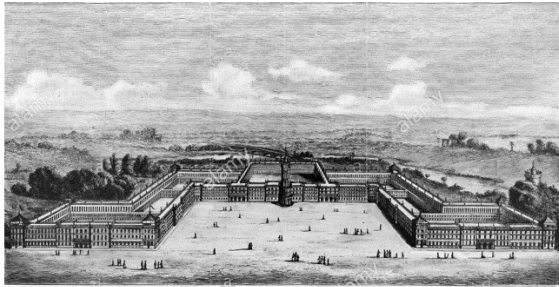
View of Fourier's Phalanstere


View of Freeland (MVRDV)

4.

It is also a message of the utopias that the urban forms are not direct imprints of either the patterns of the society's spatial usage or the actual ideology.

The symbolic order and patterns of the architectural model space and the urban forms, structures and architectural motifs are not necessarily related to or derived from the society's spatial usage and the social or ideological background. Significantly different ideology can stand behind the same forms with respect to the central ideological motif of the historical era. Furthermore, the same basic architectural elements and forms can serve totally different social patterns and usage than thousand years ago. Likewise, the same social practices can be carried out in different spatial forms, no matter it is an old or a new form. Through the development of technology, the basic architectural elements, the city and the residential spaces do not change fundamentally. According to the examples of the utopias, the new social patterns and usage of the space are not reflected on the architectural forms, rather than on the spatial connections and on the layout of functions: the new social practices create new situations in the evoked urban structures and forms.
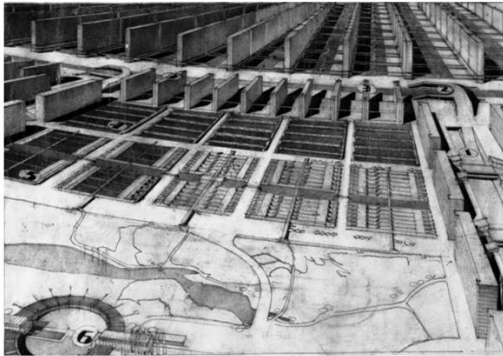
R. Neutra: Plan of The Rush City
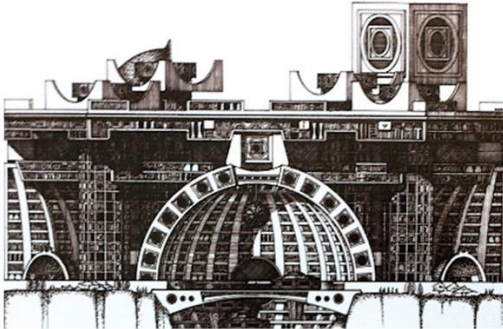
P. Soleri: Plan of Arcosanti

5.

The dynamics of the instruments also applies for the architectural instruments.

The architectural form, spatial structures and patterns are all instruments that have an impact on their users: they can provide space for certain practices and they limit other functions. This twofold effect is highlighted in the utopian spaces: those spatial models that are unable to expand do not overload the natural environment, but they are unable to react on the demands and needs of the developing society. The transparent spaces are safe but depressing at the same time. The dynamics of the accumulation of our instruments is a usual phenomenon in our times[2] that manifests in an architectural context in those built structures that fulfil the desired standard of a limitlessly rising comfort, in the unrestrained expansion of scales and in the symptom of 'overbuilding'. It is also applicable for architecture that certain instruments that solved problems in the past are only leading to even bigger difficulties.

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[2] cf. Büchele, Herwig. (1990) Christlicher Glaube und politische Vernunft: für eine Neukonzeption der katholischen Soziallehre, Europaverlag: Wien.
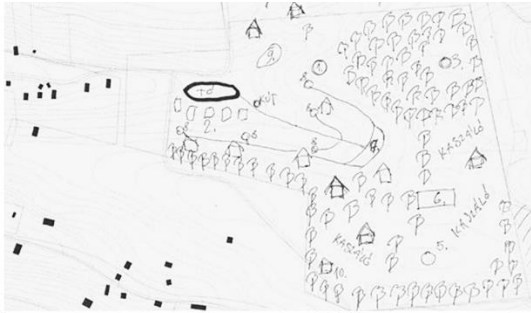
Mental map of the Nyim eco village (2010)

Life in the Community Shed (2017)

6.

The creative ethics methodology can be a basis of the ecological architectural design.

The architectural instruments are not only technical in their nature, not value neutral, but they are based on ethical principles. Questions must be raised, like who benefits from these instruments and what kind of interest groups are behind them. The architectural spaces of the utopias provided built settings for whole communities: they are universal, inclusive and accessible for all. At the same time, they always have ontological, philosophical, ethical aspects, not only towards humanity but also towards our environment. The methodology of 'creative ethics'[3] can be a useful basis and syllabus in the decision-making for all kinds of architectural design processes, either in the context of social practises or the questions concerning the environment.

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[3] cf. Büchele, Herwig. (1990) Christlicher Glaube und politische Vernunft: für eine Neukonzeption der katholischen Soziallehre, Europaverlag: Wien.