1.2. From Masterplan to Masterplanet: Architectural Worldbuilding

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Abstract

As an epistemological method, the imaginative narrative densifies possible and impossible global constructions, entanglements, and relationships within our reality. This turns the characteristic architectural utopian spirit of discovery from a future projection or an occupation of space — sometimes understood as a form of colonization — towards a discovery of reality in which we can question our current assumptions and viewpoints. In widening the horizon of architectural utopias, which have long been read solely from a representational perspective, these imaginative utopian narratives explore future relations without aiming for universal validity or realization. Architectural worldbuilding is therefore proposed as a counterposition to pragmatic utopianism, with its focus on formalism and finality, in order to dissolve the rigidity within the utopian by extending the spectrum of viewpoints on our environment.

Key words: worldbuilding, grand narrative, reality, environment, estrangement

> Utopia is a not state, not an artists' colony. It is the dirty secret of all architecture, even the most debased: deep down all architecture, no matter how naïve and implausible, claims to make the world a better place.
> KOOLHAAS, 2004

In spite of Koolhaas' reference to the immaterial presence of the utopian in architecture, the "dirty secret" still seems to be all too often rooted in the human spirit of discovery. While entrepreneurs have long since grown weary

of the planet and its habitat and are already directing that spirit of discovery towards the vastness of the cosmos, in one of their latest projects, the Bjarke Ingels Group has chosen the referencelessness of the open sea to locate — or rather *not* locate — Oceanix City, a ten thousand resident floating city. Despite maintaining sustainable building standards, the design of this city can be seen as another attempt by Bjarke Ingels Group to fulfill its self-imposed goal "to change the surface of our planet" by "hitting the fertile overlap between pragmatic and utopia" (Bjarke Ingels Group, 2021). More in a modern than in a postmodern sense, the Bjarke Ingels Group thus defies the complex climatic problem of rising sea levels through small-scale architectural intervention. The ghost of social transformation may be inherent in the project (see Martin, 2010: 150), but its haunting seems limited to an exclusive group of inhabitants.

Due to its morphological similarity to concentric urban designs from centuries past, Oceanix City offers potential clients or residents the promise of a "good life" through its form-given architectural structure — according to an object-based analysis of architectural utopias. However, a comparison of the utopian significance of Oceanix City to Bertolt Brecht's understanding of estrangement opens up a different interpretation. In his writings on theatre, Brecht emphasizes the fact that estranged representation "allows us to recognize the object, yet at the same time causes it to appear strange" (Brecht, 1967: 680). If one then focuses on the blurred environment rather than on the object under the lens, the proposed architectural structure of Oceanix City would offer a more conscious consideration of the present, familiar ecological environment. Yet, instead of this alienating effect unfolding, the lens is solely directed toward the represented object. The effect is thus not operative, and rather than a disillusion of the proposed environment, it appears estranged and illusory.

From Masterplan to Masterplanet

Masterplanet, another emerging project of the Bjarke Ingels Group, builds on Oceanix City, both theoretically and formally. In proposing a new global building standard consisting of ten major factors that need to be handed on to future collaborators and governments, the project demonstrates a method based on the upscaling of small-scale architectural interventions to a masterplan and ultimately to a "Masterplanet". The efforts made to materialize this project reflect a deep pragmatic utopianism, based on the notion of an architectural utopia as a final state or blueprint.

Despite its global scale, Masterplanet belongs to the category of projects which are not radically projective enough, a fact often discussed by researchers (Jeinić, 2019: 14) in the context of architectural criticism, following Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting's call for a more projective architecture in "Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism" (2002). Masterplanet, with its formal emphasis on the finished architectural product, sits squarely in the modernist tradition, embedded in a time in which we are well aware of architecture being either in a constant flow of objects (following new materialism) or within contingent, emerging, and changing circumstances (following actor-network-theory). Despite this ontological distinction, the shift from the architectural artefact to a "thing among other things" is an ecological liberation from the anthropocentric distinction between objects and living beings. Furthermore, thinking with, or rather *in* an "ontology that assigns primacy to processes of formation as against their final products" (Ingold, 2010: 2–3) serves as protection against a condition of disempowerment and creative stagnation.

Developing a Different Spirit of Discovery

In a recent publication, Bruno Latour evokes an inward-looking planet. In referring to two current crises (climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic), he warns: "Locked-down of the world unite! You have the same enemies, the people who'd like to escape to another planet" (Latour, 2021: 68, my translation). In light of Oceanix City and Masterplanet, this appears as a clear statement against the indulgence of the market-driven, boundless spirit of discovery and argues for our attention to be directed *toward* our planet and its infrastructure, not away from it. While Bjarke Ingels' driving force seems to be his loss of trust, not only in an ability to act projectively through politics, but also in a scientific ability to act per se,[1] Latour argues for collective action instead of reactionism (2021: 161). But where to address this collective inward-looking spirit of discovery? How to uncover the complexity and the entanglement of the present, or dis-assemble the taken-for-granted to create meaning, to formulate the problem in Latour's terms (2005)?

In the speculative narrative *Planet City*, architect and filmmaker Liam Young refers to a scientific concept by biologist Edward O. Wilson. While the Half-Earth Project proposes declaring half of the planet as a natural reserve in order to preserve biodiversity (Wilson, 2016), Young radicalizes this concept further, imagining a single Planet City inhabited by the entire global population, which

surrenders the rest of the planet to a global wilderness. Young moves away from the idea of intervening through masterplans and suggests instead a global utopian world based on scientific research. He therefore proposes an undoubtedly different nature of discovery. Young tries to dispel any concerns of an implied universality: "This is not a neo-colonial masterplan to be imposed from a singular position of power. ... Piece by piece we will dismantle the world we once knew and remake it in new configurations" (Young, 2021: 40–1).

Mirroring a growing awareness of the increase in climate change in his imaginative narrative, Young strongly positions himself against the "continuation of the colonialist project" (Fairs, 2021). Narratives as scaling devices can therefore assemble different layers, local as well as global. They visualize possible worlds that reflect on our present infrastructures in order to reach a condition of balance between the human and the non-human — not as grand narratives, but as heuristic approaches: "As we write stories, we write the world — and in this way storytelling can be considered a critical act of design" (Young, 2021: 35).

Disentangling the Entanglement

Utopian narratives which question our current situation and imagine ecological reconfigurations change our perception of time; so argued the phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur (1990: 207). A specific world may be projected in the future, but the perception of time implies that the narrative as an event is discussed and perceived in the present: "What is proper to every event is that it brings the future that will inherit from it into communication with a past narrated differently" (Stengers, 2015: 39). The utopian not only represents and preconfigures intermediate states but also investigates and interprets human and non-human ecological relations in the present. Through an understanding of the world "as an unformed but generative flux of forces and relations that work to produce particular realities" (Law, 2004: 6), the focus of consideration does not shift the depicted world in the future, as it is often discussed in the context of utopian research, but the narrative instead offers an extension of present reality.

Ruth Levitas has contributed significantly to the idea of the utopian as a method. In relation to temporality, she argues that the "relation between realism and utopia may be considered as tension or contradiction" (Levitas, 2013: 128). In light of the pragmatic utopian spirit of discovery, these doubts seem to be reasonable. However, if storytelling is accepted as a part of our reality instead of being seen as a possible or impossible alternative, Reinhold Martin's

claim that utopia's ghost "infuses everyday reality with other, possible worlds, rather than some otherworldly dream" (2010: 5) misses its target. Martin's argument for "utopian realism" is based on a concept of reality that is founded on an imbalance between the material and non-material environment. In our entangled present we neither need "other, possible worlds" nor "otherworldly dreams", but new, hitherto unknown perspectives and ways of seeing that enrich our knowledge. As Latour enquires in his essay, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern":

Can we devise another powerful descriptive tool that deals this time with matters of concern and whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care, as Donna Haraway would put it? Is it really possible to transform the critical urge in the ethos of someone who adds reality to matters of fact and not subtract reality? (Latour, 2004: 232)

Criticizing the conventional epistemic method that (scientific) knowledge is only achieved by adopting an impartial view from nowhere, Donna Haraway argues for a "practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing" (Haraway, 1988: 584). These "ways of seeing" may become "ways of life" through the articulation of new utopian narratives as creative practitioners, both in revealing the construction of current human and non-human relations, and in reconstructing and exploring new realities through speculative fabulation.

Architectural Worldbuilding

Repeatedly building and rebuilding our world feeds our reality with what was previously perceived strange. Imaginative architectural worldbuilding therefore explores the world of estrangement and out-thereness through which new relationships might emerge. It offers an extension of reality through the multiplication of situated, scientific, and interrelated matters (Latour, 2005: 248), containing new points of view on the more-than-human nature of our planetary ecological system. The narrative as method is then not a simplification of reality, as the utopian is so often accused of being, but instead brings more understanding to global constructions, entanglements, and relationships: "To submit oneself to the terrifying namelessness, to unlearn the old set of meanings and names, is already to be on the path to a utopic reconfiguration of the world" (Marder & Vieira, 2011: 40).

So what if, instead of progressive formal change, the intention of architectural worldbuilding was to expand reality by questioning its actual state? An epistemological perspective offers the possibility of leaving behind the idea of a single, built reality and counteracts the tendency for anthropocentrism within the utopian. The projection of a future is thus not implied in utopian narratives; rather, they can enrich the discourse about an ecological ethics of care. The intensity of this discourse on previously unknown ecological relationships illustrates the potential of architectural worldbuilding in light of an inwardly directed spirit of discovery. Through the creation of imaginative narratives and their dissemination, we can question our viewpoints, assumptions, understandings, and relationships, and thus discover and explore the spectrum of our ecological reality.

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