La Phalange: Journal de la science sociale découverte et constituée par Charles Fourier, 1842. Cover showing Victor Considerant’s perspective view of Fourier’s phalanstery.
Notes on Utopia, the City, and Architecture

ANTOINE PICON
TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL FACIEJEW

The shortcomings of modern architecture and urbanism, such as their disregard for the practicalities of everyday life, are still commonly blamed on their supposedly “utopian” dimension. This narrative, whereby modernist planners and architects were blinded by a drive for unrealistic, superhuman perfection, takes for granted that there has always been a relationship between utopian thought and urban planning and architecture as we know them today. After all, we are told, buildings and cities figure prominently in the writings of all manner of utopian thinkers since Thomas More.

But if the relation of architecture and utopia has been a mutually interested one, this mutual interest is far from simple or straightforward. In this text, in order to unfold a far more complex relationship between utopia and the built environment than has generally been assumed, I question how urban and architectural projects were marshaled by utopian thinkers. In this light, urban planning and architecture appear not as concrete objectives but as crucial mediations that enabled the utopian message to gain momentum. Conversely, the very idea of calling any architecture “utopian” begins to be problematized when we reconsider the link between the legacy of nineteenth-century utopian thought and the projects of twentieth-century modernist urbanism and architecture. In the case of Le Corbusier and others, where “visionary” might be a more appropriate qualifier, we may no longer be able to call any architecture “utopian” at all.

Blurry Projects
Architectural and urban historians often relate the utopias that have succeeded one another in history since the Renaissance to landmark architectural projects: Tommaso Campanella’s City of the Sun, taken to be the model for innumerable urban designs, or Charles Fourier’s phalanstery, presented as the forerunner of the collective housing schemes of the twentieth century. Yet such architectural proposals hold a unique place within their authors’ oeuvre. Even as they play a pivotal role in utopian discourse, rarely are they drawn in detail, as if any overly meticulous graphic representation risked compromising their ideological and programmatic efficacy. Fourier’s
phalanstery is emblematic of utopia’s curious reluctance to carry its urban and architectural reflections to their logical end. Consistently upheld as a key development in social doctrine, it is nonetheless rarely depicted in drawings, engravings, or paintings. Why this restraint? Does it come from a profound inability to incarnate itself in the details of a renewed built environment, or might there be another explanation, more complex than a mere lack of practicality and a contempt for material work that detractors of utopia so emphatically attribute to it, following Karl Marx in rejecting its allegedly unrealistic grand schemes?

That so many architects and engineers can be found in the ranks of the great utopian movements of the first half of the nineteenth century, such as Saint-Simonianism and Fourierism, only adds to the perplexity. Several major figures of Saint-Simonianism were engineers, notably Michel Chevalier and Jean Reynaud, but their depictions of the city of the future (beginning with Paris, the main object of their concern) was no less metaphorical than those of their writer or lawyer comrades. Among the Fourierists, Victor Considerant was likewise an engineer by training. First at the École polytechnique and later at the École de l’artillerie et du génie in Metz, he received the kind of architectural and building education that would have allowed him to develop his Considérations sur l’architectonique of 1834 well beyond their schematic outlines. The marked contrast between available expertise and the absence of its mobilization suggests that more is at play here than utopia’s mere inability to concretize its spatial propositions.

This double regime, determined on the one hand by the centrality of the urban and architectural project and on the other hand by the relative imprecision of its graphic resolution, is one tendency that allows us to distinguish utopia, as such, from other kinds of ideal cities and buildings produced by planners, architects, and engineers, frequently named utopian through a
recurrent misuse of the term. Of course, planners, architects, and engineers sometimes demonstrate indifference to detail, particularly in their most fantastical or ambitious projects. Thus Étienne-Louis Boullée drew only general views of the colossal buildings he imagined on the eve of the French Revolution and which Viennese art historian Emil Kauffman later called “revolutionary.” From the Ville Radieuse to the Plan Obus for Algiers, the vast urban machines of Le Corbusier reveal themselves to be equally imprecise despite the numerous drawings dedicated to their representation. But this imprecision only rarely proves to be essential to such projects. It emerges rather as the consequence of a hierarchical reordering of concerns that leads to an emphasis on the larger strokes, those aspects that come before any detailed resolution. This is corroborated by the fact that, when they are given the freedom to do so, so-called utopian designers do not hesitate to provide many details concerning their projects. Recall, for instance, the numerous fine points volunteered by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, a contemporary of Boullée, on the functioning of his ideal city of Chaux, or the proclivity for technical specifications that defined the English group Archigram’s projects from the 1960s.

The stubborn blurriness that surrounds the new Paris of the Saint-Simonians and the Fourierist phalanstery is the product of an entirely different logic than the one that defines the economy of the line of planners and architects who set their visions of a radically different built environment into motion. Again, is it entirely justified to assimilate utopian thinkers’ conceptions to designers’ visions?

Utopia in Search of Realism
To define the utopian logic, we should consider the usual reasons that led so many utopian projects to adopt urban and architectural visualizations
that are both spectacular and indeterminate. A first rationale concerns the paradoxical nature of the utopian narrative, which entails distancing oneself from the real while at the same time convincing one’s audience of a utopia’s feasibility by featuring apparently tangible elements. Along with science and technology, especially prominent in works such as Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, urban planning and architecture play a privileged role in the creation of a verisimilar world. In this regard, the futuristic novel and science fiction, which develop in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, are indebted to the utopian tradition. They make use of technological innovations and typified urban and architectural spaces that draw their readers into the plot without deterring them by the curious character of their propositions.

But this reality effect manifests itself only if the details—or, rather, the excess of details—do not betray the whole and lead to disjointedness. Like science fiction, utopia succeeds in its realism when it avoids closing in on its reader with minutiae. The effect of this sketchlike draft state is not so different from the one produced by aerial perspective in classical painting, where bluish tints and the faint traces of backgrounds produce an impression of depth. In the case of utopia (a place originally located in “no place” by More, and later situated in a future freed from the constraints of the present), blurriness—or rather the blending of precision and imprecision—is what produces a spatial or temporal alterity and emulates this effect of depth. This is what allowed the disciples of Fourier and Considerant to wander through the phalanstery’s glass galleries and its winter garden, admiring its design without knowing exactly how it looked beyond the few general views that appear in publications such as *La phalange*. The relation between precision and imprecision casts a new light. But not everything is shrouded in darkness or in blurriness—quite the contrary. As with landscape painting from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, certain details catch the eye and are thereby foregrounded, while others aggregate into a landscape whose indistinct masses evoke an elsewhere more than they describe a specific territory.

Urban planning and architecture rarely make use of effects that evoke aerial perspective. In classical painting, this type of perspective was most often used to redirect the viewer’s attention to a human action—informal or heroic, peaceful or violent—taking place in the foreground. The tension between precision and imprecision inscribes the action within a space that, despite its fictiveness, makes the action seem plausible. The urban and
architectural environment of utopia similarly point to the events meant to unfold within it. Utopia’s concern is more with these events than with the environment that makes them possible. Its main preoccupation, ultimately, is with the social. This is precisely what marks one of its fundamental differences from the visionary production of planners, architects, and engineers who are unable to relinquish the primacy granted to spaces and to buildings. By the same token, their projects are rarely presented by utopian thinkers to evoke an ideal future society. Fourierist harmony cannot be found in the type of facility imagined by Boullée or in Ledoux’s ideal city. In its search for an ordered social intensity, it instead takes cues from Louis XIV’s Versailles as well as from the covered passages of the early industrial period.

The urban and architectural projects we most often wrongly identify with utopia appear in literary and, especially, cinematic counterutopias, as if the professionals of the built environment, in their eagerness to minutely prescribe the spaces and structures of the future, were able to produce only the conditions for a nightmarish sociality. This pattern is followed by François Truffaut in his cinematic version of Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 (1966), which is partially set in 1960s-era English housing projects whose claims of fostering a better world were consistent with the principles outlined by modern architects and planners in the Charter of Athens. Truffaut’s critique, moreover, was not strictly aimed at modern architecture and planning but also targeted the era’s technological aspirations, as is made clear by the film’s foregrounding of television’s ubiquity and of the monorail prototype—the pride of French engineers during les trente glorieuses (“the Glorious Thirty” postwar boom years of 1945–1975)—that appears in several of the film’s key scenes. In Brazil (1985), director Terry Gilliam similarly exploits the counterutopian potential of entire swaths of modern and contemporary architecture, including some of Archigram’s proposals.

A Question of Objectivity
At the turn of the nineteenth century, the nature of utopia was profoundly altered. Once a literary genre whose mode was fundamentally critical, as illustrated by More, Campanella, and even Bacon, utopia became a social project supported by movements that sometimes counted several thousand adherents in addition to sympathizers from all social strata. Strong in


number, the disciples of Robert Owen in England and those of Claude-Henri de Rouvroy de Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Étienne Cabet in France were no longer satisfied with critiques of society as it existed. They sought to displace it for a better world, and to have it realized not on the shorelines of a faraway island located nowhere. In parallel, if utopia had tended to write itself in the present, far from known lands but nevertheless in the world, it was increasingly deployed in the future and in a variety of places. Utopia even began to predict an end to history marked by its own definitive triumph on a planetary scale. Crucially, this universalist hope claimed to be scientific. Before Marx, who would later borrow this ambition despite his harsh critiques of Owen, Saint-Simon, Fourier, Cabet, and their followers, the utopias of the first half of the nineteenth century alleged they expressed a truth, scientific in nature, about society, its history, and its possibilities for renewal.

The truth of early nineteenth century utopias relied on facts, or rather on the construction of objectivity, to rehearse that fundamental category of modern and contemporary science that historians Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have studied at length.9 Scientific objectivity relies on objects and images but is ambiguous toward them. Images are especially dangerous in this usage, at times an instrument of proof and at times a kind of abstraction. This explains the iconoclastic tendencies of scientific disciplines, as Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel explored in detail in their exhibition on the “war of images” in the sciences, religion, and art.10

Confronted with the question of objectivity, the utopias of the industrial era adopted an original strategy that granted them an indeterminate status. They used urban and architectural images to demonstrate objectivity of method, while also playing with the degree of resolution of those images, ranging from the clear-cut to the blurry, thereby preventing their over-prescription. In this way, the depicted projects acquired a somewhat spectral status, anticipating the auratic impressions that photography would struggle to capture in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Saint-Simonians’ Paris and the Fourierist phalanstery thus seemed to draw from the register of the spectral even more so than from the conventions of the urban and architectural proposal.

As in all spiritual ceremonies, the specter synthesized past and future. The spirits convened by a medium generally came from the past even if they were asked to predict the future. It may be the case that not enough attention has been paid to what binds the phalanstery to the past: for example, to what the phalanstery owes to Versailles and to those last French kings who preserved the tradition of its grand baroque palace; or to the kinship between the phalanstery and the industrial-era covered arcades and metal
greenhouses that impressed so many commentators. The incursion of the past into the present and the future is even more explicit in the ideal communities of Owen, whose architecture openly draws from the medieval models of the béguinage and, especially, the university quadrangle. In the project for New Harmony, however, massive factory chimneys remind us that this project is unquestionably oriented toward the future and has no intention of reclaiming a past.

Machine Dreams and Emancipatory Perspectives
From Ernst Bloch to Michèle Riot-Sarcey, the philosophers, sociologists, and historians who have scrutinized utopia have frequently underscored the seemingly contradictory double movement that animates it. On the one hand, utopia tends to mark the end of history, an end that corresponds to the realization of the ideal society it calls for. On the other hand, it participates in the opening of a realm of possibilities in the present, an opening that manifests itself precisely as the potential for change that history claims to uncover. Hovering between a future written in advance and one rich in possibilities that are merely hinted at, the utopian approach refrains from determining itself completely. This restraint functions as a genuine antidote to the danger of the totalizing—or at the very least technocratic—drift for which detractors have continually reproached it. Restraint counterbalances certain aspects of social mechanization that are implicit in descriptions of ideal cities, aspects that also mark the projects for “pacifist armies of workers” promoted by some Saint-Simoniens and Fourierists in the first half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, utopia seems to periodically abandon itself to fantasies of well-oiled machines worthy of an engineer. But in contributing to the destabilization of an existing order of things, it also reveals itself to be undisciplined, heterogeneous, unpredictable.

This two-facedness is perhaps the main reason behind the stubborn blurrieness that envelops its urban and architectural visions, as if it intended to orient human action through the built environment while being open to the possibility of an unexpected outcome. From this vantage point, the phalanstery functions as both a mold and an envelope flexible enough to let a spontaneous creative act be exerted on it. This imprecision further suggests...
that its intention is not to dictate the course of the future. It provides the contours of a narrative matrix rather than the details of a resolved plotline.

Utopia, urbanism, and architecture commingle through this capacity to suggest multiple narratives. Each project takes root in a narrative matrix that is never made completely explicit. An important distinction persists, however, between the realms of thought and practice. While an openness to the richness of the possible is one of the main features of the utopian spatial imaginary (despite its constraining appearance), architects and planners are more interested in the common denominator shared by the many narratives that emerge from a project—a functional denominator but also emotional and aesthetic. For the latter, the multiplicity of possible intrigues matters less than the way in which they lead back to the planning of spaces and structures through use, emotions, and the senses.

This distinction helps to explain the conditions that all but guaranteed the failure of situationist urbanism, developed by Guy Debord and his colleagues, who proposed not only to reconcile the mechanisms underlying the production of the city with the creative spontaneity of its inhabitants but to abolish the distance separating utopia from the project. This impossibility is even more foregrounded in proposals such as Constant’s New Babylon, an endlessly revisited project for a city, highly detailed on the one hand and completely open-ended on the other.13

The Imaginary and Its Media

Despite their relative scarcity, urban and architectural images derived from utopian projects typically circulate across various layers of society, from the reformative elites to the popular classes. Thus, the phalanstery functions as a speculative object as much as it specifies various concrete ambitions for a better future. These images lead to other images. In some cases they act as sources of inspiration, and in others they demonstrate the enduring influence of certain representations. Eventually, image chains are formed. The phalanstery of Fourier and Victor Considerant is indebted to Versailles but also to the ocean liners that were meant to demonstrate the feasibility of large-scale collective dwellings. Le Corbusier made use of this association
between collective dwelling and ocean liner in his designs for the Unités d’habitation, and he was not the only one. Echoes of the phalanstery have reverberated throughout the history of modern architecture. Some have not yet been dissipated.

The social imaginary is woven through these protracted and intertwining image chains, which form a fabric at once thick and richly colored. By following this or that thread before deviating to follow another, individuals participate in the production and reproduction of a social imaginary in the same way spiders tirelessly spin their web by moving across it. But this imaginary, if we are to trust the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, is in the end determined not by images but by deeper structures that organize both the threads and the fabric that make up the weave. In a book on the Saint-Simonians, I hypothesize that these structures, which Castoriadis calls “social imaginary significations,” have something to do with very general representations of time and space, representations that are in turn informed by utopia. In the case of the Saint-Simonians and the Fourierists, these representations may well circulate around a space that is both contrasted and interlaced, and of a time that manifests itself as both linear and cyclical, in appearance contradictory. Like the Saint-Simonians, the Fourierists adopted the notion of the network to integrate spatial and social differences within the same mesh structure. We too often forget that the phalanstery was not intended to exist in an isolated state, that it is constituted rather as a node in a network meant to cover the planet. Social time instead reflects the arrow of progress. But it also carries the traces of an insidious return to the past without which the nineteenth century would not have known how to conceive a future worthy of the name.

Beyond the deep structures of the social imaginary, utopia also acts on the media that allow this imaginary to influence practices. The means used to communicate images of the ideal Saint-Simonian city or the Fourierist phalanstery may help to explain why visual depictions remain relatively scarce. The role of the printing press and of engraving and the relationship between text and image deserve to be studied further since they account for a set of transformations that are fundamental to the way in which these projects have been disseminated.

Periods of intense utopian activity generally coincide with such transformations. More’s Utopía is roughly contemporaneous with the print revolution, and Saint-Simonianism and Fourierism are similarly defined by the rise of the modern printing press and engraving. Despite the differences that have been insisted on in this article, utopia as such and so-called utopian urban planning and architecture may well intersect in the space of media. Projects for ideal cities from the Renaissance, the “imaginary” archi-
tecture of Boullée and of Ledoux, and even the most radical propositions of modernity reflect critical junctures in the mediation of the imaginary and of practices.

Utopia embodies a hope made even more radical since it is partially haloed by blurriness. If we return to Fourier’s phalanstery, what definitively matters is not the details of its spatial configuration and its material construction—apartments, glazed arcades, and winter garden— but the hope it embodies and the circuits that allow for this hope to circulate.

Notes

1. The habit of tracing the roots of modern architecture and urbanism to utopian thought reached a peak in Western architectural discourse in the mid-1970s in Anglo-American literature with Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter’s Collage City (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977); in Italy with Manfredo Tafuri’s Progetto e utopia (Rome: Laterza, 1976); and in France with Francoise Choay’s La règle et le modèle (Paris: Le Seuil, 1974). Recent architectural polemics that continue to build on this assumed linkage are diverse and were recently revived on the anniversary of Thomas More’s Utopia, an event celebrated by Somerset House in a yearlong series titled UTOPIA 2016: A Year of Imagination and Possibility. Traces of this series are registered on the website http://utopia2016.com/.

2. On this theme, see, for instance, Ruth Eaton, Ideal Cities: Utopianism and the (Un)Built Environment (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007); and Lorette Coen, À la recherche de la cité idéale (Arc-et-Senans: Institut Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, 2000). Following the ideas advanced by Françoise Choay in her 1965 anthology L’urbanisme, utopies et réalités (Paris: Le Seuil, 1965), this type of publication tends to conflate projects that are utopian as such with the visionary production of architects and engineers.


15. Picon, 297–305.