

# THERE IS NO MORE PLACE FOR UTOPIA

UTOPIA TODAY : CALL FOR PAPER  
SALINE ROYALE, ARC-ET-SENANS

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This text is an attempt at determining the operating value of utopia for the project in view of the deep mutations within our contemporary societies.

# THERE IS NO MORE PLACE FOR UTOPIA

Our societies appear inapt to imagine utopia. Now we are faced with overwhelming reports over the condition of our planet, we can only regret the lack of visionary inspirations. Our thinkers and artists, traditionally the first utopia suppliers, seem to have become useless in turning the world upside down, re-thinking it differently, drawing other outlines for our horizon, or shaking our out-of-breath societies by their vision and opinions. In a recent article published in *Le monde diplomatique* (April 2010), *Créateurs en mal de provocation*, Dany-Robert Dufour, a philosopher, also points out the absence of true critical thoughts in contemporary art which limits itself « to producing the unforeseen, the unexpected, but without any potential signification. »<sup>1</sup> D.-R. Dufour accuses artists to be used by the art's market which they connive with the mere capitalistic production mode, that is to say, continual innovation « logically required by the need to create new desires. »<sup>2</sup> Market's and artists' financial participations in the process inevitably lead to "some confusion between innovation and quest for meaning." Rather than being opposed to the system, artists fully participate to it, and feed it, burrowing more and more in a provoking and de facto venal act, under the guise of individual freedom of speech. Yet, as Sylviane Agacinsky says in her book *Volume*, « there is no hope for opening a political space<sup>3</sup> as long as some appropriate the law, and form one body with it (according to Claude Lefort's expressions). On the contrary, it is in the void, the bottomless space, the deletion of a present and

<sup>1</sup> *Créateurs en mal de provocation* in *Le Monde diplomatique*, avril 2010, n°673, p.3

<sup>2</sup> *Créateurs en mal de provocation* in *Le Monde diplomatique*, avril 2010, n°673, p.3

<sup>3</sup> According to S. Agacinski, this is a critical political space, which is therefore creative in terms of exchange of ideas.

presentable power, that men, being necessarily divided and spaced out, can relate to each other and gather. »<sup>1</sup> But do such spaces still exist, that is to say spaces where artists could escape the world and be *outlaw* ? In other words, the question which interests us is : **is there a place for utopia as a critical act?**

Etymologically, utopia is what is situated *nowhere*, *ou-topos* ; by extension, what is *far from us*<sup>2</sup>. So any utopia is spatially independent so as to be better thought, out of the world and its constraints. We have to state that our society is at a critical time of history: utopia has literally no more place to be built, either physically or mentally.

Physically, almost no countries remain geographically indetermined, located nowhere - territories have been conquered - no space remains far from us - the planet is connected, Google earth provides pictures of the whole world. As the spatial conquest is at a standstill, imagination cannot find, in the short term, any virgin lands where it could be totally free ; no more wild idyllic island or *terra incognita* where to retire and found a completely new society. Great epics, conquests, *Voies royales*, unknown adventurous countries in which humanity experiments and transcends itself, where imagination was exalted by the adventure fever, are now impossible. But, in order to think and create, imagination and, in this case, utopia, need such constraintless spaces.

Wherever men go, they end up in known territories which, far from exalting the beauty of the world, have become, under the pressure of two consumerist generations, a huge environmental mud : generalized ugliness. For the first time, men cannot escape their condition nor the cesspool they have created. In this context, the resort to utopia becomes semantically and physically problematic. This aspect is reinforced by another factor : the environmental saturation which prevents from imagining the world.

## THE ENDLESS HOUSING ESTATE

As a logical consequence of the full space being conquered, this tends to be more and more filled, up to the excess. Jean-Paul Dollé, in a recent work, *L'inhabitable capital*<sup>3</sup>, shows how the capital has recently transformed the traditional rooted value of dwelling in a pure property value with great modifications for the landscape : from a place, it becomes an area divided in plots that are ready to be built on. As the value of soils has to be increased, and knowing that the value of land's real estate is higher than any other allocation, the distinctive feature of capitalism will be to submit ground to property development up to saturation : the endless housing estate. In the same way, public spaces, which are empty and free by definition, are doomed to disappear : their *freedom* conflicts with spatial privatisation, and therefore with its profitability. Ultimately, public space where dialogue, exchange and critical thought

<sup>1</sup> Sylviane Agacinski, *Volume. Philosophies et politiques de l'architecture*, éditions Galilée, 1992, Paris, pp.95-96

<sup>2</sup> In Charles More's book, *Utopia*, Raphaël Hythlodée, Utopia's storyteller, knows marvellous stories from faraway countries.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Dollé, *L'inhabitable capital. Crise mondiale et expropriation*, nouvelles éditions lignes, 2010

can fertilize will tend to disappear. This double saturation phenomenon makes it simply impossible to build utopia either physically - no more space to settle since saturated space prevents from autonomous space existence - or mentally - no more place to imagine it.

Now, this absence of opening is exactly the main feature of any utopian society : « saturation reveals utopian community's coercive space, completely planned, "voidless, without slack period nor gaps." »<sup>1</sup> In any utopian community, as people are one with power, society does not feel the need to picture itself differently. Utopia is therefore paradoxically incapable of generating anything else than itself because it does not have the necessary distance to question its own structures, or **the necessary space to think about utopia.**

Our contemporary societies are indeed entangled in a similar process : capitalism, by saturating space and eliminating shared space, reproduces utopian space which we adhere to, without any restrictions, because its perversity lies in giving power to individuals who are free and not indebted to others. I am the law and, inevitably, I am one with myself. Therefore, any criticism is vain and any dialogue has become useless since there are no common values to be criticized anymore. This leads, D-R Dufour says, to contemporary art's tolerance for anything : « given that intolerable propositions will have to be tolerated in the name of freedom of speech, how could we deny that this ultrademocracy directly leads to tyranny at a political level. »<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the political angle of this transformation of space, every anthropological consequence of this utopisation must be examined : knowing that « men do not live in space but in places they have fitted out for their stay on Earth »<sup>3</sup>, endless housing estate and its non-stop identical houses prevent them from dwelling, space is no longer worth an existential experience. Man is reduced to a particle with a humdrum existence in a monotonous landscape where nothing happens anymore. This devalorisation of space - as a place of experience - had already been forecasted in several 60's-70's utopias or counter-utopias : Archizoom (No-stop city) and Superstudio (Le monument continu) transform the world into a huge monotonous area ; since architecture no longer has any value as an experience. H. Hollein, C. Casati and E. Ponzio advise to replace it by medicinal substitutes similar to drugs (Architektur, Pillola ("pill") lamp) far more powerful than spatial sensation ; micro-houses, clothes or helmets of M. Webb (Cuschicle and Suitaloon), H. Hollein (Mobile office), W. Pichler (Kleiner Raum et TV-Helm), Haus-Rucker-Co (Flyhead) bring dwelling to nought since architecture has no more rooting and sharing value. « Whether they swallow a pill or wear a helmet that "transforms the environment" to walk through the city, our contemporaries live their lives alone, without meeting anyone, as if the outside public world no longer existed, as if the world had been transformed into a huge and endless inner life because of the internalization of experience and individual perceptions. »<sup>4</sup> This reduction of

1 Dominique Rouillard, *Superarchitecture. Le futur de l'architecture 1650-1970*, éditions de la Villette, 2004, Paris, p.438

2 *Créateurs en mal de provocation* in *Le Monde diplomatique*, avril 2010, n°673, p.3

3 Jean-Paul Dollé, *L'inhabitable capital. Crise mondiale et expropriation*, nouvelles éditions lignes, 2010, p.63

4 Dominique Rouillard, *Superarchitecture. Le futur de l'architecture 1650-1970*, éditions de la Villette, 2004, Paris, p.272

experience to a stream of personal stimuli consecrates a man who never goes out himself and withdraws into himself, always waiting for stronger sensations from which consumerism<sup>1</sup> marvellously benefits.

This depreciation of being and place also lies in Charles Handy More's collectivist utopia : in Utopia, « people change houses every ten years randomly. So any idea of private property is banished »<sup>2</sup> and any appropriation of a place is vain. Either in the name of the strongest individualism or in the most egalitarian democracy, these kinds of manichaeian thoughts attack human beings' integrity by controlling their dwellings.

## HOW TO GET OUT OF THIS?

In this context, our first challenge is not really how to rethink utopia but rather how to get out of this situation. For this purpose, we will have to reopen this saturated world where ersatz and sensations have replaced experience. We will have to put human beings back in their places, allow them to exist without getting confused with themselves. It is only by opening the world that we will be able to re-imagine it, to dream about utopia again which, like an asymptot, should strive towards its aim without ever reaching it. Nevertheless, the notion of utopia will inevitably require a redefinition as its wish for autonomy has been stopped because « the problem lies in the fact that there are no countries or places "which are totally free of constraints" ». The alternative would be : either to build something somewhere for a real society, or to prefer the blank page and reinvent the whole thing. »<sup>3</sup> Tabula rasa, which is the only way of realizing traditional utopia, would basically repeat the destructive process of liberalism . The aim is no longer the creation of space, but its transformation which leads to an inevitable deep mutation of architects' and urbanists' professions. Therefore, Sylviane Agacinski contrasts two thoughts : one *archic* thought - utopic - in which an architect with the knowledge he is the only one to possess, imagines the perfect object, fixed with no territorial, societal or anthropological issues, without any possible deviation since the totality has been decided previously, and another *an-archic* thought which « would also be an a-teleological thought, not reconcilable with authoritarian domination »<sup>4</sup>, a project that is constantly in progress and in which competencies are shared between all civil society's partners, as well as architects, politicians... and above all, users.

This *an-archic* thought which deeply modifies the notion of project is gradually becoming integrated into what we call "weak thought" urbanism (Yves Chalas) or reflexive urbanism (François Ascher) which is, according to Jean-Louis Génard, « an urbanism which would have given up a "top down" model founded on peremptory

1 In sociological meaning.

2 Luc de Brabandere, Jean-Michel Besnier, Charles Handy, Erasme Machiavel More. *Trois philosophes pour les managers d'aujourd'hui*, éditions Village Mondial, 2000, Paris, p.211

3 Sylviane Agacinski, *Volume. Philosophies et politiques de l'architecture*, éditions Galilée, 1992, Paris, p.28

4 Sylviane Agacinski, *Volume. Philosophies et politiques de l'architecture*, éditions Galilée, 1992, Paris, p.46

certainities, on autonomous disciplinary knowledge and on a clear separation between "specialists", owners of legitimate and accepted competences, and "uninitiated people", the former knowing what is good for the latter. »<sup>1</sup>

Recognition of a certain expert knowledge in anyone involved in architecture and urbanism implies the revalorisation of the concerned partners by their **participation** in the project. Everyone's action on the project becomes the community's real space where transitory and continually changing solutions are confronted and discussed. « This result is not an opus, it is never finished, it does not allow action to stop once the result has been reached, because this result has to be maintained constantly. »<sup>2</sup> This thought implies the realisation of an open space, neither totally defined nor planified, which stimulates encounters and dialogue, and favours as well political as artistic creativity<sup>3</sup>.

Utopia, in this perspective, loses a great part of its monumentality, founded and definitively determined (arkhê), but, on the other hand, it deserves to be considered as an open process in constant transformation (an-arkhê). The process that gives birth to a project allows everyone to experiment oneself as a person in one's mutual sharing with the whole community. From this point of view, the major characteristic of utopia no longer lies in one's ability to grow away from the world but, on the contrary, utopia has to reveal the beauty of the world by finding its place in reality, by working from the world's background rather than on the world. From utopia to edotopia (here).

1 Jean-Louis Génard, *Architecture et réflexivité. Une discipline en régime d'incertitude*, Les cahiers de La Cambre - Architecture n°6, décembre 2008, Bruxelles, pp.13-14

2 Sylviane Agacinski, *Volume. Philosophies et politiques de l'architecture*, éditions Galilée, 1992, Paris, p.49

3 Elsa Vivant, a French urbanist, shows the importance of this kind of space for Richard Florida's concept of a *Creative city*, implying the renewal of urbanists' work: « a formatted and planified framework leaves no place for improvisation. Rather than designing a creative city, urbanists' challenge is to create adequate conditions for serendipity and creativity by leaving space to the unknown, by accepting that non planified or even non authorized uses appear in the city, by allowing unplanned and improbable encounters. », Elsa Vivant, *Qu'est-ce que la ville créative?*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2009, Paris, p.80.