

Utopia/Dystopia

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## Utopia / Dystopia

Vivien Greene

Utopia is a malleable and elastic concept. The term can refer to an ideal society, but what constitutes this society remains a point of disagreement. Whether a real utopia can exist and, especially, endure is a knotty question for debate, particularly in the era after Communism's fall, since utopian desires were often linked by twentieth-century intellectuals with totalitarian ideologies and the regimes of the Soviet Union and China. Historian Russell Jacoby posits two basic forms: "blueprint utopianism," which is implicit in the realization of a government premised on a utopian model; and "iconoclastic utopianism," which, simply said, is the need for the idea of utopia to live in our imagination.<sup>1</sup> In the creative world, many artists have striven for utopian ideals while working in collectives and have articulated the need for utopianism in less tangible and, probably, more successful ways. These looser or more abstract methods of visualizing utopian tenets form a thread that runs through modernity and postmodernity. Utopias are based on a tenuous paradigm (for this is a word from the Greek that, after all, means "no place") and, when implemented, rarely last for a sustained period of time, but they can during their brief lives be places of creative ferment—of inventiveness—that generate ideas for further experiment. As we see in the short essays that follow, individuals may also use visual imagery, architectural spaces, design processes, and urban land to create "utopias" that provide respite from or alternatives to the demands or structures of contemporary life.

Long before they are enacted as actual models of living, utopias tend to make their appearance in texts. Within historical narratives, they are, more often than not, nostalgic projections on a reconstructed past or a distant locale. Even in the fictional realms of literature, they rarely occupy a present time and real place but, rather, an imaginary past, an invented present in a faraway site, the future, or the world of fantasy. When located in a reimagined ancient era, they can be triumphs, as with the Greek poets' Golden Age extolling the prelapsarian existence of humanity at one with nature. More often than not, though, utopian fiction shows its underside, for the idea of utopia is frequently intertwined with notions of dystopia, an experiment that takes a tragic turn. Thomas More, in his *Utopia* (1516), conjures an isolated island to describe a better world but one that in hindsight sounds fascist, prescient now that the twentieth century is over, while in *1984* (1949) George Orwell positions his utopia gone wrong in a grim futuristic society. Both are characterized by oppressive canons and the suffocation of independent thought. Fairy tales are another locus for utopia. Oz was the place where wishes could come true, yet L. Frank Baum based the Emerald City on the model city—the White City—of the



Arthur Rothstein, *Melting Snow, Utopia, Ohio*, 1940. Farm Security Administration / Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, a sparkling world (made of impermanent plaster) symbolizing America's utopian perfection attained with imperialist strategies.

Some prophetic literary works, instead, map utopian concepts that theorists, artists, designers, and architects would adopt and adapt. For example, French utopian socialist Charles Fourier theorized a visionary model of community that would reorganize labor and refashion basic work practice from a dehumanizing or isolating experience into a communal effort that emphasized a shared work ethic and an aesthetically and physically rewarding environment. Whereas this exemplar of a free and unselfish society—which he termed a *phalanstère* (phalanstery)—was not literally viable, it was influential for social thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such ideas were integral to the planning of utopian communities of various kinds throughout the nineteenth century, including such settlements as Utopia, Ohio, founded in 1844 by followers of Fourier. Near the end of the century, American journalist Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888), a tale of utopian life in the year 2000, inspired like-minded futuristic utopian literature and the founding of actual communities emulating the society he described.

Religious splinter groups gave rise to their own fair share of utopias, perhaps most significantly, in the New World (where the untouched wilds and “pure” lives of North America's native populations were described in utopian terms in early imaginative and idealized accounts). Dissidents, starting with the Puritans, came from Europe, escaping



L. Frank Baum, *The Land of Oz* (Reilly & Lee Co., 1904). Cover illustration by John R. Neill. Collection of John Cooper

Francis Benjamin Johnston, *World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago*, 1893. Francis Benjamin Johnston Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

*Main Street, Shaker Village, Pittsfield [Hancock], Massachusetts*, ca. 1906. Detroit Publishing Company Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

*Augusta Saint-Gaudens on the Pergola*, 1913. Autochrome. Photo courtesy of U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, New Hampshire, Dourros Collection

intolerance and seeking religious freedom. The Shakers established themselves at the end of the eighteenth century in New York, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. Defined by song, communal labor, monastic living, and ingenious craft, their communities prospered into the twentieth century (one survives today, in Maine, although only a few members remain). Other utopian religious groups included the Amana Colonies in Iowa, the Harmony Society in Pennsylvania, and the Oneida Community, centered primarily in New York. Transcendentalism was another way into utopian living. Along with Henry David Thoreau's utopia of one at Walden, there was Fruitlands, in Harvard, Massachusetts, founded by the father of Louisa May Alcott, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Charles Lane, as well as Fourierist-inspired experiments such as Brook Farm.

The English arts and crafts movement spawned by William Morris encouraged the birth of arts and crafts communities in the United States (perhaps most notably Roycroft, in western New York) as well as across Europe. Some of these also integrated the precepts of aestheticism and the quest for beauty in daily living into their framework, attempting to fuse art and life. The artists' colony in Cornish, New Hampshire, represented these ideals in an elite enclave started with the move there by sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, his wife, Augusta, and the painter couple Thomas Wilmer Dewing and Maria Oakey Dewing. Later recalled as "Little Athens," the colony embraced a hybrid of classical motifs and aesthetic ensembles, couched in the rustic villages and bucolic countryside of New England. The Cornishites' homes and gardens reflected this synthesis: a frieze cast after sections of the Parthenon's runs the length of Saint-Gaudens's studio along with a pergola, while an Ionic colonnaded porch is among the architectural additions to



the nineteenth-century house he had acquired. Thomas Dewing cultivated a wild English garden that also included a wooden exedra, and the several Cornish villas and landscapes architect Charles A. Platt designed harked back to classicizing Italian Renaissance prototypes.

The interiors of the homes in Cornish were similarly arranged. Maria Dewing, a flower painter, wrote *Beauty in the Household* (1882), reminiscent, in its theories, of Morris's schema for articulated home environments in which the quotidian was made artful and could foster an elevated state of living and being. The copy Augusta Saint-Gaudens owned shows signs of use and care, with pertinent instructions underlined. Indeed, *Aspet*, the Saint-Gaudenses' home, embodies a feng shui of sorts: the sitting and dining room walls are covered with tatami mats, and an inlaid Japanese table, a Chinese scholar's table, and other objects from East Asia coordinate with Near Eastern rugs and American furniture. Maria Dewing also authored *Beauty in Dress* (1881), advice on harmonious feminine garb, later echoed in the elegant—if impractical—dress of Cornish women, yet another distinguishing component of the orchestrated lifestyle in the far-flung locale. Even events, from dinner parties to the performances they staged outdoors, were refined artistic creations. The aesthetic philosophies the Cornishites followed in their rarefied utopia, far from the unsightly metropolis, were personified in art (albeit from a male viewpoint) by the idealized female figures in concert with nature in the paintings of Thomas Dewing or those sited outside in the sculpture of Saint-Gaudens.

The Cornish idyll fell apart once the Dewings departed in 1905 and Augustus Saint-Gaudens died in 1907, and it became oppressively “discovered” by too many urban well-to-do socialites wishing to retreat during the summers from the city. This was not the death knell of the American artists' colony, however. In that same year, 1907, in New Hampshire, the MacDowell Colony was established farther south in Peterborough. Soon after, more informal colonies emerged in sites as distant as Taos, New Mexico, where the primitive, genuine life was ostensibly still to be found.

Architecture also plays a leading role in the narrative of utopian efforts. From the Italian Renaissance Ideal City and the architectural





Thomas Wilmer Dewing, *In the Garden*, 1892–94. Oil on canvas, 20 5/8 x 35 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of John Gellatly

innovations developed by, for example, Filarete, to the late-eighteenth-century French visionary architecture of Étienne-Louis Boullée and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, implicit in the thoughtful construction of space is the urge to change and better society. Ironically, both Ledoux's *Ideal City for the Saline de Chaux* (the royal saltworks) and Boullée's *Cenotaph to Newton* were never built. Instead, penitentiaries based on the Panopticon of English reformer Jeremy Bentham were later realized and again raise the terrifying possibility of too much control and demonstrate how an optimistic vision can become chillingly dystopic. Fast-forward to the 1950s in the United States, during the Cold War, and—despite the Soviet Union looming as the titanic example of the problematics of utopian principles and totalitarianism—futuristic architecture and design with a utopian tenor burgeoned, as can be observed in Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes or the planned postwar suburban communities led by Levittown, New York, both already begun in the 1940s. The unrest and revolutionary politics of the 1960s brought communes, the direct descendants of Fourier's phalanstery, and what are now called "intentional communities" such as the more even-keeled and structured collective of Twin Oaks, in Virginia, which thrives today. The 1970s saw experiments with a technological bent, recalling some of the ideas charted in *Ecotopia* (1975), Ernest Callenbach's fictional account of an ecological utopian state. One is the ongoing project that Italian architect Paolo Soleri established in the Arizona desert in 1970—Arcosanti—which endeavors to merge architecture and ecology to create a self-sustaining community. Today, the Internet is cast as a virtual, if not concrete (but does this matter?) "space" with infinite possibilities, among them a utopian (second) life. Likewise, the micro-utopias conceived by such contemporary artists as Rirkrit Tiravanija show the potential of collective practice and the creative utopian community on a small and manageable scale. At the same time, we continue to see the

R. Buckminster Fuller with geodesic dome built for Moscow Trade Fair, 1959. The Estate of R. Buckminster Fuller



production of futuristic mass-audience films such as *Wall-E* (2008) and cyberpunk computer games (*Shadowrun* comes to mind) that feature unchecked technology, U.S. cities in postapocalyptic ruin, and populations deprived of liberty.

In this issue of *American Art*, seven authors describe utopias of the imagination, the pen, the brush, the built environment, and the garden. Prue Ahrens demonstrates how John La Farge's art manifested his hopes of finding a paradise in distant Tahiti, rather than the realities he discovered when he arrived there in the nineteenth century. Scott Bukatman and Nick Yablon, respectively, write about Americans' turns to fantasy and desire in comic strips and urban rooftops in the early twentieth century. Dianne Harris analyzes Julius Shulman's famous photograph of a glass-walled home that depicts the promise of postwar California lifestyles, and Anthony Alofsin explores the debate over Frank Lloyd Wright's concept for a visionary though functional settlement in his Broadacre City model. Christina Cogdell investigates and questions the future for bioart and biodesign, while curator Susan Cross describes four new contemporary undertakings in which artists bend rules and traditions to create "revolutionary gardens" and foster sustainable communities. Together, these different voices and essays offer a multidisciplinary cross section of some of the many projects that can constitute utopia, its visions, its creative functions, its failures, and its successes.

## Note

- 1 Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005), xiv–xvi.