



Book Review

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Utopias and Architecture

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Nathaniel Coleman

Review by Esther Palfy

The title *Utopias and Architecture* may seem misleading at first, evoking a return to the study of formalist or orthodox modernism of the pre-Second World War variety, whereby the social function of architecture was considered to be able to be 'stamped in place' by architecture that desired to reshape the surroundings and behaviour of its users to a certain pre-prescribed utility. Instead of valorising this limited understanding of utopia surrounding architectural practice, Nathaniel Coleman attempts a study of what may be termed 'humane modernism', which emerged out of the 1959 Athens CIAM charter, and guided architectural modernism in the post-war years. This 'humane modernism', and the modernism under consideration in this book, is as Coleman suggests, "primarily a utopian dimension that is emphatically social". It is the emphasis on the social aspect of architectural utopia that provides the content of this book with relevance and applicability to contemporary architectural thought and endeavour.

The book is divided into two distinct parts, Part 1 deals with the discussion and conceptualising of utopias through recourse to architectural theory, history, anthropology, philosophy and sociology amongst other avenues, and attempts to draw into a discussion the significance of utopian idealism on contemporary social imagination and thought, not the least the discipline of architecture, where such imagination and application is perhaps most readily executable. In this section Coleman argues "in favour of utopias' relevance for architectural invention", thus bringing the consideration of utopias to bear on and valorise the social plane of thought, or in other words the "invention of social action". Part 2 considers specific examples of humane modernism and the investigation of architectural thought through the work of three prominent post-war architectural practitioners and specific projects of theirs, namely Le Corbusier and his la Tourette convent, Louis Kahn's Salk Institute for Biological Studies and Aldo van Eyck's Municipal Orphanage in Amsterdam. Coleman makes the claim that each of these practitioners attempted to "enrich orthodox modern architecture beyond its limitations without rejecting it", and it is in this process of "enriching" that the author considers utopias to have relevance to contemporary architectural thought and practice.

In the discussion of Le Corbusier's la Tourette convent, Coleman argues the multifaceted embrace of la Tourette by different and varied user groups - including nuns, surrounding residents, architects and architecture students, who use it alternatively as a place of residence, retreat, cultural centre and as an object of study - is realised by the foundational utopian perspectives of its architectural inception, which successfully allows it to transcend itself as an architecture purely of function. Similarly, the author argues, Louis Kahn's Salk Institute goes far beyond pure functionalism, with Kahn taking on the directives of Dr Jonas Salk to design a building that becomes "a place of encounter for scientists, artists and humanists", thus both fulfilling its necessary functional role as a research laboratory, albeit doing so in a way that extends the design functionality of it to accommodate a broader social and professional sphere of interaction, directly informed by the utopian, and in this case championed by the client.

In the author's own words, he claims that "the dimension of utopian influence on architecture I explore is the under examined potential of utopias to contribute to a continuing renewal of architecture. Something utopias can do by encouraging recollection of the architect's capacity to invent settings for the social". It is in this overarching concern that the heart of the book's preoccupation and discussion is focused. Coleman views the use and efficacy of utopias and past utopian discourses' relevancy in their capacity to use them for the purpose of repositioning utopia as a "positive informing model". In this way, the book is as much about the history of utopias in architecture, as it is a necessary theoretical reconsideration of those utopias for the present discourse and practice of architecture.

It is on the note of contemporary architectural practice, namely that of the 1990s, with which the author concludes his extrapolation of study concerning utopias that this finds expression. Far from leaving the question of utopias and utopic thinking in the past concern of pre- and post-war modernism, the author extends his considerations in the section "reforming utopias", in which he attempts to "elaborate on how utopia might be and is conceptualized (in the present), particularly by challenging the contemporary obsession with novelty".

The author presents a compelling case for any architect concerned with the usage and "user experience" of their space, beyond function and aesthetics, whilst satisfying these considerations, but also putting forth an argument for enriching space and architecture at the same time.

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Haecceity Inc. was founded in 2005 in order to establish a portal and voice for critical and radical architecture theory in our time. The aim of the Haecceity project is to contribute pertinent themes in architectural theory to academic discourse, and by doing so vitalize the discipline of architectural theory, and indeed architectural practice, at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

It is our belief that architecture as a discipline can, should and indeed must be experimental in nature - at least if nowhere else then in the vanguard. It is hand-in-hand with this experimentation that architecture theory has pertinence, and as such, the Haecceity project has relevance. The Haecceity project seeks to expand the knowledge and associated dissemination of critical and architectural theory in our time in order to expand the horizons of how architecture is understood, practiced, and by way of that, what new terrains it may hope to traverse.

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