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UTOPIA OR FANTASY: POLITICS,
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UTOPIA OR FANTASY: POLITICS, IDEOLOGY AND THE PAPER ARCHITECTURE OF BRODSKY AND UTKIN

The works of the Russian Paper Architects – etchings of unbuilt designs produced illegally during the Brezhnev era – remain the subject of conflicting interpretation as either utopian constructs or architectural fantasies. The delineation between these categories has traditionally been supported by political arguments that classify the former as ideologically motivated and the latter as diversionary or whimsical. In order to analyze this disagreement, this paper considers a selection of works produced by two of the most prominent members of the Paper Architecture movement; Brodsky and Utkin. Finally, the paper proposes an alternative reading of their work inspired by the post-political philosophy of Rancière.

INTRODUCTION

Architectural historians have noted that from the 1930s to the 1980s there is a conspicuous void in the history of Russian architecture. In the early part of this period Joseph Stalin’s professed enthusiasm for a type of repetitive neoclassicism resulted in a de facto state aesthetic. In 1957 Nikita Khrushchev took this one step further when he called for the communist party to endorse only a single architectural approach; a type of utilitarian modernism. In the following year this became the legislated state style, a decision reflected in countless civic, residential and industrial buildings constructed in the following two decades. Not only were the city skylines rapidly dominated by monotonous, geometric blocks, but people’s lives where soon shaped by minimum standard room sizes, optimal distances between apartments, ideal corridor widths and state approved colors and finishes. In the twenty years after Khrushchev’s call for industrial efficiency in all aspects of life, the USSR was transformed architecturally and socially into a communist utopia; or at least that is what the state newspaper Pravda suggested.

Because architects were not permitted to practice outside the state sanctioned system, it was assumed that, from the moment a person graduated with an architectural qualification, they would be employed in the government design office. From the point of view of the state, this was the only way for a graduate to serve the needs of the community. However, in the early 1980s a small group of graduates rejected this plan choosing instead to spend their time designing dark visions of alternative urban possibilities. As Heinrich Klotz records,

[p]revented from building and attacked by the party architects, suspected of being reactionary and under pressure of not being able to act, they withdrew into their little offices – sketched, and invented stories. It was here, in shabby basement rooms, that [they produced] a cornucopia of sketches, plans, large format presentation boards and models.

These architecture graduates, including prominent members Alexander Brodsky and Illya Utkin, submitted their clandestine work to international competitions where they gradually won both prizes and recognition. By 1990, these unbuilt works had become collectively known as the “Paper Architecture” movement.
The Paper Architects in general, and Brodsky and Utkin in particular, have typically been classified as postmodernists who have been drawn to imagine and illustrate visions of the future as a means of criticizing the ideology of the Soviet state. This position is reflected in Sir Banister Fletcher’s *a history of architecture* which provides the canonical reading of their work as a utopian reaction against state oppression. Similarly, Heinrich Klotz argues that the “architectural projects of the [Paper] architects […] are utopian.” Klotz acknowledges that Paper Architecture is allegorical, poetic and narrative – and that it draws on “fabricated” and “make believe” elements – but he maintains that it is still utopian in its intentions. For Klotz, the architectural quality of the Paper Architects drawings and the attempt to depict their propositions in three dimensions, accompanied by detailed operating instructions, affirms the utopian goal as “transforming a proposed building into action.”

Alexander Rappaport disagrees with Klotz’s position arguing that the works of the Paper Architects embody nostalgic fantasies and dreamlike, escapist visions; neither of which conform to the standard definition of utopia. For Rappaport,

[a utopian project is based on a universal perception of space which results in a general possibility of realization; the specific spatial conditions (geographical as well as human) may in fact influence the project but cannot fundamentally change it.]

Thereafter Rappaport, draws on the work of the philosopher Mannheim to argue that utopias are ideal propositions that may be set in a past “Golden Age,” in a timeless “eternity” or a “happy future” but they cannot be set in all three at once. Similarly, utopias may be conceptualized in an ideal past, but they are not blinded by nostalgia. This is because, as Craig Johnson argues, the inverse of utopia is nostalgia, not dystopia. The longing for some idealized past is the opposite of the desire to construct an alternative future. Whereas fantasy architecture is essentially “arbitrary” and fleeting, utopia has an imperative quality.

The present paper sets out to examine which of these interpretations – represented here by the views of Klotz and Rappaport – is more supportable? It commences with an overview of the two accepted types of utopia as a precursor to analyzing four works jointly produced by Brodsky and Utkin. Because Brodsky and Utkin produced around 70 works during the 1980s alone, it is impossible for the present paper to provide a comprehensive coverage of their oeuvre. Instead, the present paper draws on a small number of their most high profile urban scale projects (three of the four featured here won international awards). In order to investigate the conflicting views about their architecture this paper relies on a combination of textual and architectural (graphic) analysis. This analysis is informed not only by architectural and urban theory, but also by the works of the meta-political philosopher Jacques Rancière whose work is, in the concluding sections of the paper, the catalyst for an alternative interpretation of utopia in the architecture of Brodsky and Utkin.
UTOPIA: OPPORTUNITY OF OPPOSITION

Lewis Mumford famously argued that two major types of utopian thinking could be distinguished through their framing of utopia as either an unexploited opportunity or in opposition to something else.12 The origins of the former case may be found in Plato’s Republic (c380BC) wherein Socrates, in order to define justice, describes in detail an imaginary city-state. Socrates’ oratorical construction is shaped by a holistic vision of a just community.13 Its constitutive parts are drawn from Plato’s experience and are shaped, in turn, by the words of interlocutors, Glaucon and Adeimantus.14 Through the power of Socrates’ elocution, Plato’s Republic is constructed in the mind and is simply awaiting the opportunity to be realized.

The example of Plato’s Republic features many of the characteristics of what Mumford calls a “utopia of reconstruction”15 or Coleman describes as a “projective and constitutive”16 utopia. Fredric Jameson identifies this type of example as the “utopian plan” or the “utopian project”; the ideologically inspired proposition of a solution to existing conditions. While there are subtle differences between Mumford’s, Coleman’s and Jameson’s versions of the utopian project, they all agree that this type of utopia is proposed as an opportunity that can be realized through the investment of sufficient capital, labour and time.

In contrast to Plato’s Republic, in 1516, when Thomas More described the mythical voyage of Raphael Hythloday to the ideal island state of Eu-topos, he not only revitalized the classical tradition of imagining ideal societies, he also inextricably coupled that tradition with the notions of voyaging and separation, opposition and discovery.17 That Eu-topos is an island is explained in philosophy as a simple trope of separation; a narrative device for isolating a system and thereby reducing its potential for corruption (Fig 1). Yet this separation is also an intrinsic component of the second philosophical tradition of utopia; it is something that exists in opposition to the present. Indeed, the first part of More’s account is centered on the social failings of his own country; flaws that are later juxtaposed with the social solutions found in Eu-topos. At a smaller scale, More’s work also articulates the difference between the tawdry, commercial and immoral qualities of the home port – where the philospher explorer is forced to commence his voyage – and the tranquil, pious community of Eu-topos’s waterfront.

More’s fictional account of Eu-topos has many of the qualities of Mumford’s second category; the “utopia of escape”18. Coleman argues that this approach provides “compensation rather than opportunity,”19 a quality which he describes as “pathological.”20 Here Coleman is drawing on Paul Ricoeur’s analysis of utopia21 wherein Ricoeur argues that the “pathology of utopia is escape.”22 Ricoeur stresses that “imagination” takes on a role in the formulation of utopia that is “inventive” rather than “integrative,” or perhaps theoretical rather than practical.23 Jameson describes such visions as demonstrations of the “utopian impulse.” This, Jameson’s category of utopia, is described by Johnson as
"a markedly different [model], having to do not with building a brand new society or revolution, but with a displaced, striving desire or 'wish' to be something else" or somewhere else.

In the work of Mumford, Jameson, Ricoeur, Coleman and Johnson a similar division between two major types of utopia is identified. While in all cases, there is an implied veneration of the "utopian project" over the "utopian impulse" they do acknowledge that, regardless of motivation, both are forms of utopia. The question then is, in the context of the architecture of Brodsky and Utkin, does their work conform to either of these accepted models?

THE ARCHITECTURE OF BRODSKY AND UTKIN

The term paper architecture is especially appropriate for the work of Brodsky and Utkin. The Soviet state's prohibition on private practice restricted their architectural expression to the illicit production of intricate drawings. With a few exceptions, the majority of their projects are executed on paper as dense, black and white drawings. Their works typically feature plans, sections and elevations, sometimes merged as part of the same image and sometimes divided into sequential cells, like a comic book, showing different conditions of the same project. While the content of their works is generally a recognizable architectural form, it could also be a much more fanciful or eccentric object (a giant pair of scissors or a sea-serpent) but delineated using the same architectural conventions and representational techniques.

Another characteristic of their work is that the distinction between image and text is frequently blurred. Some sections of their drawings are covered in tiny writing (a mixture of Russian and English), while others that appear to be lined with words are, on closer inspection, filled with meaningless script.

The four projects chosen for analysis in the present paper are grouped into two pairs that are each investigating a similar theme. The first two projects, including the one that initially brought Brodsky and Utkin to international prominence, are critiques of utopia. The second two projects involve propositions that support or maintain the separation between the state and non-conformist citizens.

In 1982 one of Brodsky and Utkin's etchings won a competition sponsored by the Japan Architect journal. Their entry, Crystal Palace, presents a towering, glass structure that is sited outside the city limits of an unnamed town (Fig. 2). From a distance the structure is like a grand expansion of Joseph Paxton's iconic modern structure of the same name. Yet, to reach the seemingly magical Palace and be rewarded with the treasures of modernity, the peripatetic traveller must first leave behind the city they know. Once they have crossed the wastelands they discover that instead of being a large building filled with a cornucopia of delights, the structure is largely an illusion. The Palace, which is constructed from a series of "glass plates, stuck into the huge box of sand" is a mirage. It promises the Soviet worker a modernist utopia that, as Rappaport argues, "proves on closer inspection to be an illusion built on a municipal rubbish heap."
In this project, the Crystal Palace is presented as a “beautiful but unrealizable dream;”30 a “mirage which calls you always”31 but which is ultimately unattainable. This project is typical of Brodsky and Utkin’s supposedly utopian works. It is, first and foremost, a critique of the modernist utopian project although not necessarily a critique of the Soviet version; the location is unnamed and there are few clues beyond a general Western European style of clothing (long coats, scarves and hats). This is neither a nostalgic nor a constructive vision. It is critical or darkly satirical; qualities that are conventionally aligned to “utopias of escape” rather than “utopias of reconstruction,” but which otherwise defy the simple binary classification widely adopted by philosophers.

In 1984 Brodsky and Utkin completed another design for a Glass Tower, this time winning second prize in the Japan Architect journal’s international competition. Underneath the title of their project on the single drawing is an epigraph from Genesis; a verse which alludes to the Tower of Babel. The central image of the drawing is a plan viewed from a great height. The plan depicts a landscape that was once the site of a vast tower by the sea; a structure that has collapsed at some time in the past and is now part of the topography. Since the time of its collapse, Brodsky and Utkin observe, it now “lies like a transparent mountain range, like a dead city, like a skeleton of a gigantic animal that became extinct in prehistoric times.”32 Around the base of the tower a more conventional city has grown over time, its denizens engaged in work, commerce and recreation, all oblivious to the flawed and abandoned utopia that now serves as scenography to their new urban stage. Brodsky and Utkin explain that “[n]o one notices this Tower, and no one remembers [the] time when its peak was lost in the clouds. And so it will lie shining in the sun, accessible to [one’s] understanding only from a great height.”33

The Glass Tower project depicts a society constructed in and around the remnants of a failed utopia. The tower itself, or what we can glean from its debris, was once an ornate form with arched and buttressed windows and soaring spires. The town around its base has a strong, modern street grid that features a mix of government offices, individual houses and sports stadia; perhaps suggesting a once totalitarian system now shaped by a free-market economy. Interpreting the project beyond this point is more difficult. The collapsed tower is sufficiently ornate and bejeweled that it might be a reference to Russia’s Tsarist past, now erased and forgotten, first by communism and then by capitalism. This reading is reinforced by the timing of the project; completed during Mikhail Gorbachev’s rule and at the time of glasnost – increased transparency – and the removal of restrictions on farmed produce and commercial trade.34 Viewed in this way, it may be possible to argue that the project is an escapist utopia; a nostalgic celebration of a largely forgotten past. But this may be reading too much into the work. The opening quote on the panel from Genesis is clearly a reference to the failure of utopian visions in the face of arrogance and hubris. Perhaps then, the project is simply a commentary on the inevitable failure of utopia? Once more, this is not a vision of an ideal society so it is not part of the opportunistic, or constructed tradition, but its presence in the “utopia as escape” category is equally difficult to justify.
In the same year that Brodsky and Utkin completed the Glass Tower, they produced a competition entry for a project entitled the *Wandering Turtle*. The single page drawing for the project is dominated by a dense wall of high-rise housing. Against this backdrop a large structure mounted on wheels, like a mobile hill town, is being navigated through the “maze of a big city.” The wheeled structure is the height of a ten-story building and it visually evokes an urban fragment, torn from its terrestrial moorings and set adrift in a foreign country. People are crowded at its base although it is unclear if they are normal urban crowds or the inhabitants of the mobile building itself, pushing and pulling it through the urban boulevards. A sequence of panels across the base of the drawing reinforces this latter reading. In these panels a number of annotated diagrams refer to snails and turtles transporting their own homes on their backs. In between these images are a series of the sketches showing how the *Wandering Turtle* might work, like a cross between a ship and a hotel, lumbering slowly down a city street.

The *Wandering Turtle* could appeal to utopian notions of escape, but there is also a touristic quality about the proposition; this particular project is more about navigating and experiencing one world than it is about escaping another. The explanatory drawings even suggest a semi-serious desire to see such a vehicle constructed. This project may be centered on an idiosyncratic image but beneath its fantasy façade it provides a commentary on the desire to be part of one world, while experiencing another.

The final project considered in this paper has strong parallels to the *Wandering Turtle* proposal. The *Villa Nautilus*, completed for the *Bulwark of Resistance* competition in 1985, depicts, in plan, section and elevation, an ocular-shaped island in the midst of the main traffic thoroughfare of an industrial city. The visible presence of the island at street level is a small collection of furniture and an ornate wardrobe. A single man, a “hermit”, stands at the prow of the island, facing into the traffic that flows, like a dangerous river around him. The rooflines of the cars merge in the drawing into waves and the hermit’s pipe leaves a smoke trail that is clearly evocative of a ship at sea. The hermit’s ongoing presence in the traffic is, during the day at least, a testament to his ingenuity and stoic resistance. However at night, he can climb inside the wardrobe and descend a spiral stair to access his ideal villa, four levels deep and well-provisioned as if for a long voyage.

The *Villa Nautilus* continues the theme of living within an industrial city but apart from it. Like the *Wandering Turtle*, it emphasizes partial separation from society while still being within it. While the desire for disassociation is readily translatable as an escapist impulse, the *raison d'être* of the *Villa Nautilus* and of the *Wandering Turtle*, appears to exist in parallel with the totalitarian urban fabric of the state. This suggests a strange balance between attraction and repulsion; an architectural or utopian example of the Stockholm syndrome? Thus, while it is difficult to frame these examples as utopias of opposition, it is even more fraught to convincingly portray them as utopias of opportunity. They each propose alternative models of living for small groups or individuals, seemingly accepting that they are unsuitable for a larger number of people.
Using the conventional categories previously identified for ideologically motivated utopias it becomes clear why there are conflicting positions in relation to Brodsky and Utkin’s work. The first two works represent, respectively, a critique of the utopian project and of the utopian impulse. The aesthetic language of the architectural critique may draw on a range of sources, styles and traditions — reinforcing the view that the work is fantasy architecture — but this is fantasy with a purpose, not to escape a flawed totalitarian utopia, but to illuminate both its corrupt condition and its inevitable passing. Thus, these projects are concerned with utopia but they are neither utopias of opportunity nor of opposition.

The latter two projects have a different agenda; they are promoting an alternative but not an escape. They posit the construction of a microcosm of utopia in parallel to, but isolated from, the state. Michel Foucault defines spaces that are “other”, isolated, self-contained or non-hegemonic as heterotopias. For Foucault, heterotopia is the space where the undesirables of utopia find their position in a self-contained, yet isolated world.36 Both the Walking Turtle and the Villa Nautilus projects conform to this view of the world. They are positioned in contradistinction to utopia; they are separate from it but defined by it. The inhabitants of Brodsky and Utkin’s urban vessels are not attempting to escape utopia, but to find their own alternative; a position that explains the curious Stockholm syndrome-like relationship that Brodksy and Utkin’s architecture has with the unrelenting modernism of the Soviet state. Fittingly, Georges Teyssot argues that the “ship is the heterotopia par excellence.”37 Both the Walking Turtle and the Villa Nautilus rely on maritime imagery and allusion to structure the relationship between a present, ubiquitous and flawed utopia and an alternative parallel state of delicate equilibrium. Therefore, the second pair of projects could be considered utopian insofar as Foucault’s heterotopia is conventionally regarded as a special type of utopia.

UTOPIA IN THE POST-POLITICAL WORLD

Both the utopian project and the utopian impulse are founded on ideology and enabled by politics. But what is the condition of utopia in a world without politics? In recent years a growing number of philosophers have used the term “post-political” to describe life in a world where apolitical administrative structures dominate. From Alain Badiou38 to Slavoj Žižek39 there is widespread agreement that the nature of politics has changed completely in the last four decades. French philosopher Jacques Rancière argues that much of the world has experienced the “end of politics” because ideologically grounded political systems (like socialism or fascism) have been supplanted by managerially founded systems of governance. Thus, instead of political parties seeking to achieve some social ideal or uphold a moral principle, the focus of managerial governance is growth, transparency, productivity and security.41 If then, there is one critical difference between politics and governance, it is found in the latter’s lack of overt grounding in ideology.

Because a wide range of philosophers, including Mannheim and Bloch, have inextricably linked the concept of utopia to that of ideology,42 Rancière suggests that the nature of utopian thinking must
radically change in response to the death of politics. Whereas past political systems actively sought ideal social models – what Rancière evocatively describes as supporting explorative voyages in search of visionary utopias – current systems of governance are largely concerned with mitigating risk, controlling growth and seeking consensus. The result of this change is that Rancière suggests that the last of the true, ideologically-motivated utopias can only be found in the ashes of totalitarian regimes. A close analysis of this proposition reveals two, simultaneous interpretations, each of which is important in the present context.

First, one possible reading of the place of utopia in the ashes of politics, relates to the propensity for totalitarian regimes to use architecture as a means of representing the power of the state and to construct the state’s ideal vision of society. Thus, for example, in the early 1980s in Romania, Nicolae Ceausescu initiated an extensive building program in support of a singular autarchic vision of the future. However, by 1989 these same buildings were torched in a popular uprising leaving Ceausescu’s utopia literally in ashes. This interpretation suggests that while politics and ideology collectively enabled the construction of utopias, as political systems are gradually supplanted by managerial ones, the last remnants of utopia are likely to constitute a large part of the detritus left in the aftermath of the totalitarian regime.

The second possible reading of Rancière’s proposal is that while totalitarian political systems may have actualized their utopian visions in architectural and urban form, this same process marginalizes people, encouraging them to imagine alternative, visionary and critical propositions. Such revolutionary, but typically private utopias only come to light when the regime they are reacting against has fallen. Once again, confirming the place of utopia, in the post-political world, in the ashes of the totalitarian state. This reading is especially significant for analyzing the architecture of Brodsky and Utkin. While their works might have gestated during the final years of Breshnev’s authoritarian regime, they achieved prominence during Gorbachev’s period in power; an era wherein the state famously concentrated on the managerial notions of glasnost (transparency) and perestroika (restructuring to achieve greater efficiency). Using Rancière’s definitions, Breshnev could be regarded as the last of Russia’s politicians and Gorbachev the first of Russia’s managers. A distinction that implies that the work of Brodsky and Utkin was actually produced during the rise of a post-political world; a time notoriously devoid of ideology, especially given the manifest failure of past ideologies to achieve anything approaching a utopian reality.

CONCLUSION

While Brodsky and Utkin’s architectural propositions conform to neither Jameson’s utopian project nor his utopian impulse their works are, at their core, projects about utopia rather than being utopian projects. This distinction is encapsulated in Rancière’s argument about the nature of utopia in the post-political realm. Following Rancière’s reasoning, because Brodsky and Utkin’s architecture arose at the start of a post-political era, it might be expected to expresses the widespread rejection of ideology, (the
failure of utopia represented in the two glass tower projects) and the importance of a plurality of systems, each legitimately operating in parallel (like the *Villa Nautilus* and the *Wandering Turtle*). While the vast majority of the theory and philosophy developed to explain utopia has been written from the point of view of a dominant ideology and associated political will, a new theory is needed to interpret the complex, contemporary projects of the post-political world.

FIGURES

Figure 1: Thomas More, *Utopia*, woodcut from 1518 by Ambrosius Holbein.

NOTES AND REFERENCES


15 Mumford, The Story of Utopias. 15.


19 Coleman, Utopias and Architecture. p.63.

20 Coleman, Utopias and Architecture. p.63.


Crystal Palace is both the name of the Japan Architect journal's competition and of Brodsky and Utkin's entry to the competition. This was relatively common practice for Brodsky and Utkin but it does cause confusion for the some of the later works because they sometimes submitted multiple entries to the same competition.


Brodsky and Utkin, “Crystal Palace” in Nesbitt, Brodsky and Utkin, unpag. [Plate 6]

Brodsky and Utkin, “Crystal Palace” in Nesbitt, Brodsky and Utkin, unpag. [Plate 6]

Brodsky and Utkin, “Glass Tower” in Nesbitt, Brodsky and Utkin, unpag. [Plate 14]

Brodsky and Utkin, “Glass Tower” in Nesbitt, Brodsky and Utkin, unpag. [Plate 14]


Brodsky and Utkin, ‘Walking Turtle’ in Nesbitt, Brodsky and Utkin, unpag. [Plate 28]


