

Re-Launching History: Utopia and Spirituality from *Carceri* to Junkspace and Beyond

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Summary Statement

Compared with the earlier periods such as the 18th and 19th centuries that witnessed the surge of utopian proposals to enhance the spiritual life or the era known as “1968,” one of the hallmarks of the contemporary life—often considered in broad frameworks such as those of “neoliberalism,” “control societies,” “globalization,” “post-industrial,” or “bio-politics”—seems to be the disappearance of the concept of “utopia” and its spirituality from political and cultural life. This absence is arguably more significant in architectural theory and practice. As contemporary theorist Mark Fisher, quoting Frederic Jameson, recently argued in *Capitalist Realism*, “It’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” That is, while we can observe the *dystopian* imagination at work wherever we look—perhaps nowhere more so than in the contemporary science fiction literature and your run-of-the-mill Hollywood blockbusters—we rarely *if ever* find ourselves today confronted with a *utopian* imagination.

In architecture, technological future cities have seized the position that formerly belonged to utopian imagination and its spirituality and have changed it to a stage for, in this case, architectural blockbusters in the name of sustainability, technology and progress. Indeed, whenever one reminds others of the fact that we used to have “utopian” alternatives to capitalism, the answer that is inevitably given amounts to a version of the mantra that this—utopia— “is just not realistic”; more, the reason “utopia” is deemed unrealistic is that it is equated with (allegedly) *failed ideologies* of the past (Communism being only the most recent and perhaps significant one). We no longer have utopias because they all failed; and they failed because they were “ideological.” Yet, for theorists such as Slavoj Žižek, Jameson, and Fisher, among others, the position of capitalist realism—its imperative that subjects today must be “realistic,” and that only realism, whether political, ethical, or artistic is a valid one, and that spiritual life should be considered as unrealistic and hence unreal—is *itself* an expression of pure ideology, of, in fact, Ideology written large.

Topic

This paper, engaging a range of key theorists discussing “ideology” and “utopia” such as Paul Ricœur, Karl Mannheim and Ernst Bloch— along with the (changing) relationship between ideology and utopia—studies the role utopia does play, can play, and perhaps should play today in the society through the lens of architectural studies to invoke spiritual life by retrieving the exiled history back into the cultural life. This call for taking back the history, in architecture as well as other cultural discourses, should not be conflated with and confounded by yet another version of historical quotation and nostalgic provocation of the past forms and styles. Rather it should be a performative refutation of the perpetuating belief in the exhaustion of the alternative and the death of the history. It is a way to believe again and to prove it that the future would not be the same. It is an effort to respond to the query that in this dystopian version of the end of history that we live today, in what sense, and how, can “utopia” be mobilized (again) as a means to intervene in the present context? How can architectural utopia be redefined to be influential and not just another unrealistic narrative?

Scope

Instead of answering the question by going straight into addressing the various and more often than not problematic and debatable definitions of ideology and utopia, which seems inevitable in the face of these questions, it would be better to take a certain distance and take a detour to approach the question from another point of view where one may have a clearer image of the status of utopia and utopian imagination in the discipline of architecture. This detour takes the Junkspace, proposed by Rem Koolhaas, the prominent Dutch architect, as its starting point and following Jameson, connects it with the history and its alleged “end” regarding capitalism or capitalist realism. In Junkspace, Koolhaas, through a repetitive, performative and provocative style of writing, delineates what he calls “the real product of modernization.” It depicts a dystopian vision of the world in which we live not only in architectural context but also in the generality of the culture. Junkspace here, could be read as the elucidation of the world in which all that was once sacred, and could be observed in hierarchical positions on and around the *axis mundi*, now has been flattened and profaned in the homogenous post-apocalyptic space of “corporate globalization” and “bio-politics.” In this situation the notions of spirituality and sacred are just other commodities that system perpetually produces and reproduces to feed the Junkspace.

Carceri d'Invenzione created by Piranesi (the Italian architect and artist, 1720-1778), and its interpretations by architectural theorist Manfredo Tafuri among others, have also been used as the paradigmatic representation of the interiority of capitalism and its spatial reification in Junkspace. This parallel and the comparative study of these two versions of total interiorities, which are extended to the limits of the human life, could offer a better vision of architecture and its role in this new configuration of the world in which the act of sacralizing or creating cosmos out of chaos, a la Mircea Eliade, could not be of help anymore and as Koolhaas emphasizes in the last sentence of the Junkspace, “the cosmetic is the new cosmic...”

Intended Conclusions

Junkspace is the total interiority whose edges could not be perceived, but because of its expansion it is at the brink of explosion. No one could see its totality but its constitutive elements are important. If Junkspace is the result of the collision of elevator and air conditioning, maybe the collision of other elements of architecture could produce an alternative space. Junkspace described by Rem Koolhaas as the dominant spatial situation of our life, one may argue, is the implacable demonstration of what Tafuri calls the demise of architecture and its incapability in achieving and activating any utopian project. Yet, by referring to Bloch, even in this situation, the total demise of utopia and its burial under the debris of Junkspace, it is still possible to find the seeds of hope or at least delineate and demystify the current situation in which finding lost possibilities and unrealized hopes may be probable.

To do so and by referring to the Venice Biennale curated by Koolhaas in 2014 and its main exhibition titled “Elements of Architecture,” a new possibility, even though simple and perhaps naïve, for architecture to re-launch history as a repertoire of latent possibilities that are “not-yet-conscious,” will be presented. This possibility entails the isolation of the constituent elements of architecture from any prescribed or even symbolic synthesis and grammar in favor of providing a new encounter among elements in either their current situation or through their historical evolution. In the world that everything, from the minute details of life to the largest narratives of history, has been ordered and organized — sacralized in their secularization — what is needed to re-launch the history is not the process of more sacralization, rather it is the process of profanation that might take back what belongs to people from the sacralized world of religion, politics and more importantly economy, namely the human’s collective spirituality.

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