

Building Utopias

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Mankind is rarely totally content with the nature of his existence and in an effort to transcend reality has frequently envisaged an ideal world where one could practice “that most difficult and most important of all the arts - the art of living together in harmony and with benefit for all concerned”. Architecture has been cited as the art most suited to the creation and expression of an ideal societyⁱ and it is the interaction of architecture and the concept of an ideal society that this paper will study. The study also takes particular note of the tradition of the ideal society in literature, for the latter normally precedes the architectural vision. This literary movement draws on two traditions; the near Eastern Semitic tradition and the Classical tradition. Both reflect the division within the many perceptions of an ideal society between those to be created by supernatural means and those to be created by human means. But whether supernatural or human, ecclesiastical or secular means were envisaged, the projected life of any ideal world was to be the ‘good life’.

The majority of the portrayals of an ideal society have been in literary form principally because, no doubt, the construction of new built and social environments is exceedingly difficult to bring to fruition. However, built examples do exist and it is the purpose of this paper to compare three built French examples, representing the Pre-Industrial, Industrialⁱⁱⁱ and Post-Industrial^{iv} Ages respectively, which endeavor to incorporate and reflect the attitudes of a complete ideal society or community and give it a unitary three-dimensional form. Each has an implied behaviorism, that if we alter the social and physical structure of society, a new, better and happier society will be the product. It is understood that many important built ideal societies occur as settlements but the intention of this paper is to focus on the particular role of a comprehensive ideal society housed as aforementioned in order to assess the potential of architecture to reform the social world.

The pre-industrial example is that of ‘La Grande Chartreuse’, founded by St. Bruno in 1084 and the founding monastery of the Carthusian order and as such is the first and most complete French example of a pre-industrial society which lays the most emphasis on the positive role of the individual, in contrast to the feudal society of the time or the solely communal monasticism which otherwise existed. The industrial example, the ‘Familistère’ at Guise, was built by the industrialist Godin between 1859 and 1883, following the thinking of one of the early French ‘utopian socialists’, Francois-Marie-Charles Fourier, and is the most complete example of an industrial utopia housed in a single architectural entity. The third example is the ‘Unité d’Habitation de Marseille’ designed by Le Corbusier and which stands as the first built (1947-51) and most complete example of post-industrial architecture^v attempting to house a complete community in a single building.



La Grande Chartreuse



Le Familistère, Guise



Unité d’Habitation, Marseille

The three buildings are studied for their ability to translate into built form the ideas that underpin them: the Carthusian emphasis on the seclusion of the individual monk but with the support of a community as laid out in the Order's legislation, the *Consuetudines*^{vii}, 'customs'; Fourier's proposition that a building such as the Familistère would allow Man to fulfill his tripartite industrial, social and intellectual destiny;^{viii} and Le Corbusier's view of dwelling, recreation, work and transportation being the four keys to planning "Life (that) can only expand to the extent that accord is reached between...two opposing forces: the individual and the community".^{ix} Each was trying to regain a believed lost unity within mankind and evince a preference for order over disorder. An order that for all three is ultimately universal.

The place of each building in the landscape and its degree of autonomy or urban integration are analyzed to discern how each building and the society it housed related to the outside world. The character of the society that is constructed in each building is analyzed qualitatively and for how successfully that is communicated in the three dimensional architectural design. The equilibrium attempted in each building between the individual and the community is described following the built design of each project's individual dwelling units and the physical form of the circulation and communal spaces. The nature of the individual or family life in each project is reviewed both in terms of the founding utopian concept and in terms of how much that permitted the original utopian concept to be accepted. The ability of each 'type' to be repeated and for their eventual success or failure, both on their own terms and on those of the wider world, are studied to consider their contribution to improving human 'well-being' on a regional or international scale.

The three examples are seen to portray how architecture, through its capacity to organize and reflect a society can, by experimental demonstration, act as a catalyst to further social reform. But they also prove that architecture cannot by itself change a social system and where they are not widely accepted the financial element becomes more important. The cost of the Unité d'habitation in Marseilles was far too high to allow its commercial exploitation.^x But in its utopian inspiration, its adoption of a clear vision of the future based on the totality of man's experience, it continues to serve the valuable role of poetically projecting a form of society and architecture that we can only assess through its having been constructed. The desire to move from 'no-place' to 'good-place' is laudable in its concern for the improvement of the human, and today natural, environment but it does demand a certain sense of realism. By regarding the constructs of utopia as experiments, which are imperfect and will require further work upon them, we can build on their visionary virtues whilst abandoning any tendency to universal imposition. They are more profitably viewed as prototypes.

In the author's opinion, the greatest virtue of the three schemes, however, lies in their architectural integration of the community and the individual. All create a communal realm that engenders social discourse and is an integral part of the building. Each building benefits from being founded on a strong communal vision of society. The great strength of the Grande Chartreuse and the Unité d'habitation is subsequently the freedom of the individual unit within a cohesive communal structure, whereas the Familistère offers circulation as a mediator between the two: circulation as a social opportunity, so different from the contemporary motorized rat-run and richer in its relationship to the communal realm than most traditional urban streets. In creating a compact cohesive form, integrating nature within the communal realm, the three examples may have suggested a way forward in our own generation as land becomes increasingly sparse and populations rise.

It is architecture that constructs these communal and individual virtues as only Le Corbusier was bold enough to state, "there does exist this thing called ARCHITECTURE, an admirable thing, the loveliest of all. A product of happy peoples and a thing which itself produces happy peoples."^{xi} ARCHITECTURE means designing from the macro to the micro-scale, from the city to furniture and with the intellectual rigor of a unified conception, in which there is a

definite beauty and poetry. But it is easier to appreciate the concept of an artistic totality than it is to wish to impose a social totality.

Therefore, the challenge today, is to design buildings to house contemporary society that work both socially and artistically: for that is the synthesis that these three buildings illustrate is required. Successful architecture is not one or the other; it is a fusion of the two. All three examples demonstrate the quality of architecture as the art by which to create a compact synthesis between the individual and society, building and nature, and of expressing both secular and spiritual aspirations regardless of the Age. Utopia can be the vehicle for this if, through collage or the concept of the prototype, it is relieved of its too frequently autocratic mantle. In such a manner we can escape the constriction of the present and become alive, as Saint Bruno, Godin and Le Corbusier already have, in a tension between the past and the future.

ⁱ *Adonis and the Alphabet*, p.100. Aldous Huxley.

ⁱⁱ See *Utopianism*, Krishan Kumar.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Industrial Age is taken to begin with the reign of Louis-Philippe (1830-48) and to accelerate markedly under the reign of Napoleon III (1852-70).

^{iv} The term Post-industrial is understood to describe a decentralized social structure in which neither employment nor residential functions are tied to a specific location.

^v Other examples do exist, but they are either less complete (La Cité Napoleon, Paris, 1849-53, by Gabriel Veugny) or follow the Familistère (Athenée industriel, Paris, by Hector Horeau).

^{vi} Although built in what might be termed a late Industrial Age the Unité d'habitation is deemed 'post-industrial' for it looked forward to a society that did not yet exist but which in its separation of the workplace from the housing stock, and in the latter's freedom of location due to mass car ownership, approximates to the definition of a post-industrial society provided in endnote 4.

^{vii} Written by Guiges I (Prior of the Grand Chartreuse 1110 – 1136) in 1127.

^{viii} Fourier quoted by Lewis Mumford in *The Story of Utopias* p.119.

^{ix} 1933 *Athens Charter*, article 2. Le Corbusier was the principal author of the Athens Charter.

^x Peter Serenyi in *Le Corbusier in Perspective*, p.107.

^{xi} *Vers une Architecture*, Le Corbusier

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