The Micro-Utopian City

Cidade de microutopia

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ABSTRACT- Seventeenth-century plans of the city of London show us a mineral place of timeless dimension. It is a city that unites its destiny with a utopia that transcends the individual that inhabits it. Time seems to stand still; it does not come about, perhaps because its destiny-that of its utopias-transcends time itself. This city of London is followed by a new place, the city of machines and movement. It is a city that reunites individuals in moving rooms and by the time of itinerancy. Then the notion of time in dwelling emerges together with distance, as derived from the idea of velocity. In this city of movement and increasingly accelerated time, this place today has been transformed into a pop-up place. These places are places that we select as virtual points and whose emergence from a virtual reality we encourage. They are places that we link to a personal and imagined city. They are virtual places that we inhabit in an almost disjointed way and places that take us to other places, to other homes, to other times where we fulfil our small dreams and eventually our own micro-utopias.

RESUMO - As plantas de Londres do século XVII mostram uma cidade de pedra e de dimensão atemporal. Uma cidade que une seu destino a uma utopia que transcende o indivíduo que a habita. O tempo passa quase sem suceder. Talvez porque seu destino, de suas utopias, transcende o próprio tempo. A esta cidade segue uma nova cidade, a cidade das máquinas e do movimento. Uma cidade que reúne indivíduos na permanente mudança de uma itinerância. Surge, então, a noção de tempo no habitar que, unido ao da distância, deriva da ideia da velocidade. Esta cidade do movimento e de um tempo cada vez mais acelerado está se transformando em uma cidade de lugares em permanente transição: lugares *pop-up*. Lugares virtuais que unimos de forma pessoal para alcançar nossa cidade pessoal. Lugares que habitamos de forma já quase desarticulada e que nos transladam a outros lugares, a outras pátrias, a outros tempos, onde conseguimos cumprir nossos pequenos sonhos. E, eventualmente, nossas microutopias.

Keywords: Eden, pop-up place, high-low tech city, micro-utopia.

Palavras-chave: Éden, pop-up, high-low tech city, microutopia.

Introduction: From mineral to pop-up places

The city has always been the homeland of utopia: a future Eden. Another Eden or, like the poet Hölderlin said, as that primordial world in which everyone strode through the earth like a god (Hölderlin, 1990, p. 130). Thomas More (1999) proposes his utopian homeland on an island, conquered and designed for the common destiny of the people. An utopia that turns its inhabitants into authors and actors of it and its destiny.

It would be in this island where this same people would confabulate with the gods of Hölderlin. Through it More offers us a new homeland. But not everyone agreed. Many men and women had to come and go in order for them to succeed at making of their destinies, the one of their earthbound utopias, a place that becomes a homeland moving with their existence. Their existence will realize Hölderlin's wish of traversing Eden with the gods, creating a multiplicity of homelands where men and women place their own Eden. Eden, the next place, is now the goal and the will of men and women in a high-low tech city.

The maps for that 17th century London that Thomas More thought as an Eden, show us a mineral timeless city

(Figure 1). It is a city that unites its destiny with a utopia that transcends the individual that inhabits it.

The map represents a grey-coloured mineral mass. A dense mass of domestic function, chiselled and hollowed to accommodate public space. These voids remain marked, designated by the vicinity of small and darker crystallizations. They are landmarks and institutional buildings: churches and palaces that name the destiny of that public space and the citizenship of anonymous men.

Time seems to stand still; it does not come about, perhaps because its destiny—that of its utopias—transcends time itself. It is because these utopias borrowed from others, from philosophers and thinkers. Only they imagined the city. The men and women that inhabit it can only wait for the arrival of that Eden, they can do nothing but wait.

This place that inherited the Londonian modernity is followed by a new place, the place of machines and movement. A new London arises, that which the English empiricist Francis Bacon dreamed of in his New Atlantis: a technological Eden endowed with all kinds of machines and instruments to realize all types of movements (Bacon, 2007, p. 44).

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Figure 1. Map of London in the 17th Century. Source: http://londoncemeteries.co.uk/

Above and below the mineral city a new city is built. The city of movement, of the metro and the tram, a city made of lines (Figure 2). A city that reunites individuals in moving rooms, the carriages of those metros and trams, and by the time of itinerancy. The inhabitant is revealed to be a group of individuals that understand the city as the linking of two specific places united by the continuity of those lines. The notion of time arises in the act of dwelling and, together with the distance that links two locations, creates the idea of velocity. To dwell is now to transit.

The room is measured in velocity, life is intensified as an acceleration of the relationship between spaces and places. Even the day's hours are distinguished by the velocity of that linking of places, by the velocity of habitation. Man feels identified, reunited with other men that inhabit pieces of the city in which both the movement that unites them and the time that passes participate. Man rebels against time itself. He is now a revolutionary citizen, trying to challenge his destiny as a man and as a group. Time and its destiny are the substance of individuals, which together try to write their own being and even their own future.

The trip with which Francis Bacon started his way to New Atlantis trusts in a new utopian way of thinking that makes out of being a programmed action. This renewed voyage is drawn over a new utopia, now a scientific one, that looks into the future and bases its success in technique. This city of men that life-travelling upon the shoulders of their inventions is not thought of as mere imaginations but as something likely to happen. The prize to whoever was capable of building that necessary technology was to be

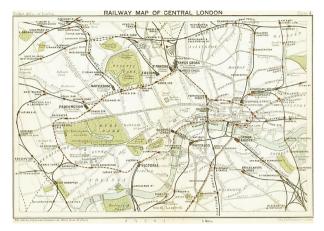


Figure 2. Railway Map of Central London (1899). Source: victorianlondon.org

the highest. Bacon remembers in his *Novum Organum* that if the founders of cities were awarded the status of heroes, inventors would be divinely honoured. Besides this, if the benefit of any particular invention has had such an effect as to induce men to consider him greater than a man who has thus obliged the whole race, how much more exalted will that discovery be which leads to the easy discovery of everything else (Bacon, 2004, p. 58).

Added to this city of movement and increasingly accelerated time there is a new place: a pop-up place (Figure 3). It is a city that is coagulated in urban lumps in a super-urban condition. These are places that we inhabit in an almost disjointed way and places that take us to other places, to other homes, to other times where we fulfil our small dreams and eventually our own small utopias. These are weak, almost micro-utopias, but ones which we can reach within the limit of our personal life and of our short existence. They are dreams that we can fulfil, dreams that we add to other dreams, both our own and those of others.

This is the city of a man who proposes a ludic and technological vision of his society. A society that questions the concepts of truth, subject and being (Vattimo, 1989, p. 107). The action of this new weak thought promotes the reduction of any strong structures, even those of that inherited city. Vattimo notes that there is a disorganisation of society originating from the start of a progressive deterioration of the principle of reality in itself (Vattimo, 1989, p. 82). The man of this disorganised society—a post-modern man, touched by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Benjamin—is convinced that the experience of Bacon's Enlightenment and his city already gave us everything they could. Modernity is over, declares the Turinese thinker (Vattimo, 1989, p. 9).

The city and its history stop being a realization of its civilization. The modern man, the same that believed he could modify time and destiny, takes hold of a global



Figure 3. Pop-Up London, Jennie Maizels.

consciousness that separates him from that destiny. She/ he becomes an actor. The city and its new men become a part of their own post-history (Vattimo, 1989, p. 152).

The man in this post-historic city abandons the timeless nature of the transcendent utopia and also the revolutionary ambition of those men that confronted their own destiny. Now the man carries his own individuality to the extreme in order to achieve a will of being unique and personal and can offered him to other men as a sum of new individualities. His destiny belongs only to him. Only he writes it and only he will be his own protagonist. It is this man of Zigmunt Bauman's liquid modernity that confronts active dwelling in a time that flows in order to make of his dwelling a life that is also liquid (Bauman, 2005, p. 33).

The sole "identity core" which one can be sure will emerge from the continuous change not only unscathed but probably even reinforced is that of "homo eligens" – the "man choosing" (though not the "man who has chosen"!): a permanently impermanent self, completely incomplete, definitely indefinite – and authentically inauthentic (Bauman, 2005).

Man's dwelling intervenes in the city it occupies and that city, in turn, modifies and intervenes in the same man that inhabits it. The city is now a city of cities. It is a city roamed by the dwelling of each man whose wandering now results in a habitational fabric that is rich and confusing, weak and mysterious, like the city the David Shrigley drew for the 2006 pocket map of the London metro. In it, its lines cross and confuse, clearing up the traces of any previous destiny and even its possibility (Figure 4).

The time of the place

Glancing now at the city—our city, the city of our contemporaneity, the one that we construct in our own becoming—therefore requires a change in the time of the glance. In that inalterable place of old whose nature is identified in the destiny of a utopia that transcends our own life, the glance was projected in the infinity of a mineral consummation of which we observe structures

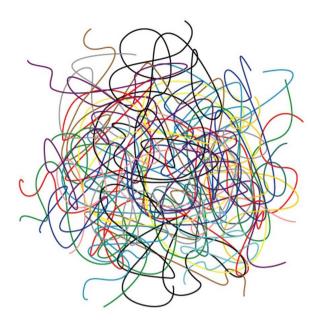


Figure 4. Cover, Pocket Tube Map. Shrigley, Untitled. Feb., 2006.

Source: London Underground.

and forms of crystallization. The time of the utopia is proposed to us as a glance in the no-time, immobility as a phase of observation.

The observation of the city belongs to Intelligence, a way of staring that awaits something that is not of itself. This Intelligence is capable of looking, it has the eyes of the soul, St. Augustine would say. The inhabitant of this city must reject the exterior look in favour of an interior look, of the eyes of the soul.

This is a soul in consonance with that Hellenic, platonic soul that dreamed up that first great city. Aesthetic deduction is immediate. The exterior glance, therefore, should serve the artistic representation of the interior glance (Argullol, 1985, p. 48).

In the city of metros and trams the enlightened man was capable of distinguishing and differentiating a part of their time, that of transit: the time of the connection of two places in the same city. Wandering through their tracks—their lines in permanent motion—supposes the time of the glance. Dwelling in that metro carriage was the time of a change, although it may have only been a new place.

This "time for a change" feeling makes possible the multiplicity of rational phenomena that give character to different moments. Far from constituting the "interior sense" or "interiority" of a "subject", they are revealed as the original definition of "beside itself" (Dastur, 2006, p. 76).

It is in this "ecstasy of temporality" that Dastur quotes that the concept of temporality as movement or sole event emerges. It is not an evasive strategy from someone that would first be in itself. The man that inhabits this machinist Eden is not escaping time, but constructing it temporarily and in his own terms.

It is Heidegger's man whose discovery and fixation is on finitude (Aspiunza, 2006, p. 20). His capacity of looking, remembering, thinking is limited by the existence of a horizon in which we are immersed, from which we cannot escape. What's more, his glance is not so much a personal glance but the space in which the others, those who keep us company in this voyage, present themselves and the world.

From this man's dwelling a new concrete existence comes forth. It is precisely in this existence that Heidegger believes time is made visible, that which Berciano denominates the event. Event is, after all, glance (*Er-äugnis*) that is constituted by itself. The event is an event of the being, or in the being, it is openness and enlightenment in a being that cannot reach absolute truth. This openness is a world-view of the world (Berciano, 1991, p. 332).

The glance arises from the man who, along with the rest of the elements, is constituted in itself when the event happens and the man happens in it (Berciano, 1991). Man makes out of dwelling an event, a glance that illuminates his finiteness.

The new city, the latest one, ours, occurs in the personal fact of a virtuality of visible screen-places like urban lumps. With them the city emerges as a sum of possible inhabited, accidental and disjointed moments, as we see in the plan of virtual visits to London's West End (Figure 5).

In this city time has been reduced to a permanent transaction of places, of virtual pop-ups that carry us from one place to another and from one dream to another. The will of the being now supposes the permanent move of the being itself. It is a permanent succession of small utopias

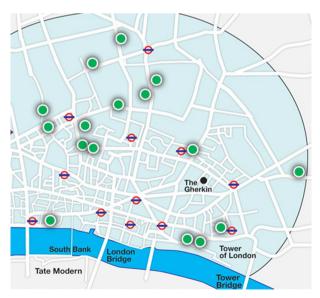


Figure 5. Plan of London's West End hotels.

and places that become an almost disappearing domestic condition. The time of the glance is now the time of a move and of a new change. Looking at the city now requires one to trap this instant of time, of a simple click, of a new move that transfers us to a new place.

Dwelling has become a permanent iterability, one that Heidegger had started, incapable of pinning an ending, a homeland in his roaming of that technological Eden. If then dwelling in the city meant succeeding at the event that thought it, in this new city Derrida identifies a man that is capable of inhabiting imagined places that conceive the city and unite with it through improvised dwelling sequences that constitute this new time-less city.

The man that inhabits the city makes of his citizenship an indefinitely iterable being. To dwell is thus to produce a mark, a pop-up that can exist even when the author is absent. The iterability of this latter city means, for the man that Derrida is shedding a light on, a destination aimed at another homeland, always different and deferred (*différance*) that surges in a single beat of time (Brogan, 1998, p. 31-40). His dwelling becomes clear digital nomadism.

The glance over this breath of time that brings us to a permanent urban moving then describes for us a city in constant pulsation, whose habitational soul resembles the electric diagram used by Harry Beck to topograph his city of the London metro. This was a topography of different intensities and resistances whose electric dwelling moves in a hidden and unforeseen way. Only the connection, as a personal and alien action, of those resistances and intensities of our electronic soul will mark the almost always erratic evolution of urban activity. We then discover that the city of the screen identifies itself with the life of him who inhabits it.

Each man makes his own city, his own home. The man, as inhabitant of his destiny that he will construct with his action and his inaction, is converted into an actor and author of his own place. The citizen, every citizen, is now an urban artist. He is the founder of a permanent, new city that, like the plan of an unfinished painting that takes us to the Tate Gallery of David Booth, tells us and reclaims the only possible authorship: one's own (Figure 6). The city is then the city of an individual that converts his dwelling into an artist's life.

A contemporary example of this personal action, which transforms men and women into actors and authors of this new city, is the research group at the MIT Media Lab called High-Low Tech. They have developed a "pop-up book" of their city where they have integrated high and low technological materials, processes, and cultures (Figure 7). Their primary aim is to engage diverse audiences in designing and building their own technologies by situating computation in new cultural and material contexts, and by developing tools that democratize engineering. They have created "Electronic Popables", a "pop-up book"



Figure 6. Tate Gallery by tube. David Booth, 1986. Source: London Transport Museum.



Figure 7. Electronic Popables. High-Low Tech, MIT Media Lab. Source: High-Low Tech, MIT Media Lab.

with electronic interactive elements, where they offer a personal vision of this new pop-up places. These new places emerge from a personal experience in the new high-low tech society. To this end, affirm the members of the group, they explore the intersection of computation, physical materials, manufacturing processes, traditional crafts, and design.

The plan of access to the Tate Gallery by metro, converted into an announcement of the citizen-artist, seems to stop momentarily in its drawing, in a place where he will inhabit another world, surely to later retake his tube of painting paste and continue his reasoning on urban action. As in that electric diagram, we can describe the different nodules by which our habitational dreams travel. They are those lumps, intensities and urban resistances of the city of London's Screen, architectures that carry us in our urban development to those other places where man fulfils his small dreams and his small utopias. The lumps are discovered as architectures where man suddenly abandons his domestic dwelling in order to inhabit his dreams for a while.

To this network that the artist of the Tate Gallery retakes from the plans of the urban metro, to those lines of movement of the dwelling-machines, new lines have been added, their own ones and others, new meshes of connection. Cybernetic, cultural, interpersonal, reading and musical networks that connect new virtual places are added to the network of metros and trams that connect physical places; these networks are added to and superimposed on infinity until converting the physical, inhabited place into a place of abstract condition that man constantly travels through, constructing his city and the glance of which discovers for us a low-high tech city in permanent habitational pulse.

Like in the poster of Cornelia Parker, this is a city that man momentarily traps, in order to later let it run to another moment and another move (Figure 8). This Underground Abstraction shows us then a city that is livelier than ever, more unforeseen in its limits and forms. It is more open to the unknown. It is a city that hopes for a new city, to come from our mobile will of being.

Micro-utopias in a High-Low Tech City

A new city arises from a life without time. A city accelerated by the new technologies, the social networks, the saturation of information, its planned expiration or not, and of all types of technology. A city achieved by its inhabitants as the integration of places and personal dreams, through the intersection of "high art and crafts" and "low technologies", in a new artist's life. This is a High-Low Tech City.

The new space that inhabits these cities and that does not intend to crystallize with them is proposed as the new place in a heartbeat—a pulse time—to reach

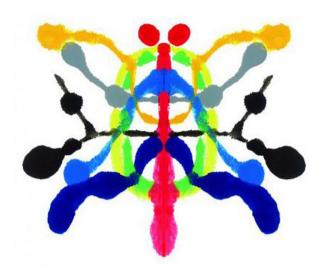


Figure 8. Cover, Pocket Tube Map. Cornelia Parker, Underground Abstract, January 2008. Source: London Underground.

the dreams and utopias of the men that update the city. These spaces are discovered as public habitations offering these utopias a new and open intimacy which is no longer kept in the secrecy of the domestic dwelling. The revolutionary and domestic laboratory of modernity has been transformed into a place of public experience. These places are linked together in cities without the urban will of the inherited city, but like provisional camps of a life of ideology that is also provisional. Like the circuses that were installed in those mineral cities, occupying their surrounding areas, voids and even their worst spaces (noplaces), new places arise. In their interior they are all open to the discovery of the dreams and ambitions of every man.

It is possible then to understand how the Serpentine Pavilion of London mutates each year, similarly to the fulfilled promise of a new dream of citizens who discover a new micro-utopia in its interior and in a fleeting temporality. In this way, with Ryue Nishizawa and Kazuyo Sejima men and women are discovered like trapeze artists (Figure 9) whose long poles, in the form of wire columns, connect us to weightless bodies imprinted on metallic skies (Figure 10). With Rem Koolhas and Cecil Balmond (Figure 12) man rediscovers those mythical aerostatic places of Henry Giffard in the 1878 Tuilerie Gardens of Paris that, tied to the earth, proposed to us the habitation of a new spatial density that had already abandoned the mineral city (Figure 11). And with Toyo Ito man inhabits a mesh of algorithmic gravity that matches vertical and horizontal, sky and landscape, and whose sharp whiteness re-proposes a new spatial odyssey, this time accompanied by tea and biscuits.

And so the fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld discovers a robot-citizen of electro-luminous soul on the cover



Figure 9. Trapeze artists. Anonymous.



Figure 10. Reflections of the SANAA pavilion. Source: Photo by Robert Pike.



Figure 11. Captive Balloon in the Tuileries Garden, Paris, 1878. Photography Prudent René Patrice Dagron. Source: Author's archive.

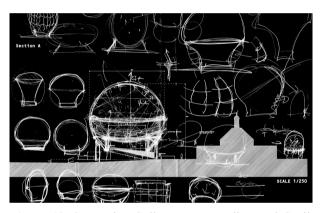


Figure 12. Serpentine Gallery. Rem Koolhas and Cecil Balmond, with ARUP. Kensington Gardens, London, 2006. Source: Author's archive.

of Vogue Magazine. The evil beauty of Maria that Fritz Lang dreamt about in a not-so-faraway city of Metropolis (Figure 13) now inhabits the Wind Tower of Toyo Ito (Figure 14). Lagerfeld proposed a new woman for this city on the move, of a materiality as transient as the glossy paper on which it was printed, and with her the protagonist of a new dream that wins a new utopia for the individual author of this place on the move. This new woman is just losing access to a deep memory related to archetypes, and they are experiencing a sort of mutation, a paradigm shift toward a new condition... in which each image recorded is superficial and fleeting (Liotta, 2007, p. 206).

Life on the Move

Life on the Move is an expression used by Durán (1999) which synthesizes the autobiographical story of Doris Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*. The Nobel Prize

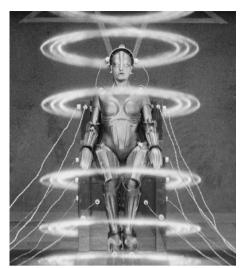


Figure 13. Maria from Fritz Lang's film Metropolis, 1927.



Figure 14. Wind Tower of Toyo Ito. Source: Author's archive.

winning author arrives in London in 1949 with a young son and empty pockets. Itinerating through several houses in different London neighbourhoods, she tries again to reach new and old dreams in the same city where Thomas More proposed a bridge to a new homeland four centuries earlier. She leaves behind, like most men and women who preceded her, the inheritance of her utopian dreams, still homeless.

The young mother rediscovers London with her son Peter from the deck of one of those ships that surely sailed the machinist Eden of Bacon. Doris Lessing, filled with renewed illusions, discovers one of the many European cities traumatized by war. A city that has ended a time—an old utopia—that entrusted its Eden to the will of men, standing on the shoulders of machines.



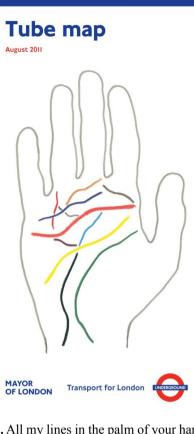


Figure 15. All my lines in the palm of your hand. Art for Underground. Michael Landy, 2011. Source: London Underground.

Four are the streets that name the four chapters that constitute the skeleton of this story, where its protagonist moves from house to house. In each move the young mother keeps leaving behind, along with the old furniture, overcome beliefs, modified convictions, worn-out ideologies, broken hopes and embraces new ones (Durán, 1999). Memory, thus, is more spatial than chronological and as such roams freely, without need for decor.

Life as travel, affirms Durán, becomes life on the move. Doris Lessing, like that young mother, accompanied only by her own destiny—her son—and facing that city —a dream again—rediscovers her own utopias with which to build her own Eden.

Her individual itinerancy from house to house turns her city into a homeland on the move and transforms its passing architectures into rooms for her small and personal dreams, an Eden on the move.

Like the spectator of the old French comedy, the inhabitant of our new cities has therefore given way to the imaginary inhabitation of pop-up places permanently on the move. The scene of an ephemeral imaginary has been added to the invariable and the real; upon visiting it, it has been transformed into part of our new city. The experience of these places in permanent motion is related to the kind of memory made of events, fragments and collages. The relationship between these fragments of the city, our pop-up places, and its inhabitants shows the overlaying of different levels and infrastructures. This superimposition happens both in the spaces of the city and in the inner selves of its inhabitants (Liotta, 2007, p. 209). Those fragments of city are their fragments of life. These fragments of life are the new city.

The city stops conceiving itself as a permanent habitation of our micro-utopias, in order to give way to a brief moment, to a movement, to the unreachable dreams of the inherited stone city. Time is modified to the point of reducing itself to this movement of the hands and clicks of those travelling magicians capable of bringing light to the unseen.

This is now the new city, a place capable of fulfilling small dreams for a citizen that does not hope for the possibility of a utopia that transcends his short existence. Magical buildings then arise, like the coloured carts of those magicians that offer to the curious citizens the pleasurable moment of being actors of its novelty. Is Dominique Perrault a magician or an architect when he brings his "Magic Box" to Madrid? They all form, to this Benjaminian dweller, in each of their possessed spaces, a complete and magical encyclopaedia, an order of the world, whose sketch is the destiny of its object (Benjamin, 1999, p. 8-9).

To the reality of daily life man has added "a new comedy" of places and lives that he also considers his own and necessary. A new citizen expands his "will to be" to a "moving of the being" that moves through unknown rooms of the hand of an architect-turned-alchemist.

Therefore, it seems that the city is now also a city of imagined, fleeting and unexpected spaces in permanent motion, where citizens experience new and individual imaginations, that when inhabited they become real. For some of them this Benjaminian dwelling will then be transcendent, for others it will be technological, and for others it will be simply playful. In each and every one of them, in this city of places on the move, man discovers his desired dream: his destiny, although it may only be his no-destiny. These dreams, our own micro-utopias, are the homeland of the new high-low tech city: a movable city of pop-up places. A movable city, as the artist Michel Landy offers in the palm of your hand (Figure 15).

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