

Episodic Architecture; seeking the utopian through temporality

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1.1 Introduction

Commonly utopia is understood as that happy place that doesn't exist here and now. As the dream of perfect, ideal existence in a flawless world; a world that is radically different from the world we currently inhabit; a world that only exists in our hopes and imaginations. This would suggest that utopias are purely figments of the imagination and that which is not realisable. But what if this understanding could be questioned? What if the notion of the utopian could not only act as a way to change and challenge the status quo of the current reality, but also become a physical manifestation within the realm of architecture? To answer these questions the definition of the term utopia must be investigated further to understand why it is perceived as a place existing only in the imagination. Several theorists have discussed and argued about what makes utopia unrealisable. A primary complication is that utopia is normally discerned as an ideal future, while it is in fact an expression of an ideal past. This argument is put forward by Fredric Jameson who states that the '*Utopian future has in other words turned out to have been merely the future of one moment of what is now our own past*'¹. Equally Elizabeth Grosz states that '*the utopian is not the projection of a future at all, although this is how it is usually understood; rather it is the projection of the past*'².

1: Jameson p151,1981

2: Grosz p143,2001

Despite this contradictory situation, the world of architecture has several times dreamed of utopian futures. The grand master plans imagined by Le Corbusier in his *Plan Voisin* (1925) or Frank Lloyd Wright in his *Broadacre City* (1932) show the capacity of the architectural imagination for redesigning entire ‘worlds.’ Obviously these visions cannot represent a utopian future if they are indeed only idealisations of the past. This illustrates a schism between a realisation of the utopian vision and the future, since the ideals of the future generally are different from those of the past. The idea that utopia isn’t a static term that can be pinned down and remain utopian as time progresses, is a problematic suggested by the notion that utopia is a projection of the past. The idea that utopias cannot be eternal indicates that architectural visions of the utopian should not propose the everlasting either - in doing so they will cease to be utopian as time passes.

To address this the following essay will seek to explore how and, not least, where, other forms of utopian production in architecture can be realised through temporality. How can that fleeting notion of perfection, utopia, be combined with the specific reality of architecture? And where in our cities, increasingly dictated by practical, economical and spatial functionality, is there room for visions of the utopian?

These questions will be investigated, initially by placing the idea of utopia in a contemporary context. Secondly the essay will discuss the characteristics of the spatial settings of utopia, both in history and in fiction, and not least in our contemporary cities. Gilles Deleuze's ideas of the island as a metaphorical setting for imagining alternate realities will give rise to an examination of three principle terms: *heterotopia*, *tabula rasa* and *terrain vague*. Following this, a solution as to how utopia and architecture might be successfully united will be explored by examining the qualities that temporary architecture offers. The work of Cedric Price, the concept of the festival, specifically the Burning Man festival will form the basis of a discussion about the notion of 'episodic architecture' as a mode of spatial production, which potentially realises utopian concepts in architecture. Examples from fictional practise, specifically Constant Nieuwenhuys's New Babylon, will be used to challenge this idea and highlight the utopian visions need for a confined spatial setting.

The dependency and conflict of utopia and architecture

2.1 The Modern Utopia

When Thomas More originally coined the term utopia from the Greek words *ou* (no) and *topos* (place) he also punned another Greek composite, *eutopia* meaning the good place. In modern English utopia is most commonly a reference to this meaning and the Oxford dictionary even defines the word as, '*An imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect.*'² Such happy places have conceivably always existed in the human imagination. From the idea of paradise and the afterlife to fantasies of El Dorado, and the wonders of the new world. These places were always located somewhere else. Be it beyond the grave or the Atlantic Sea; these utopian fantasies of the past were always located somewhere else in space. This is an important distinction from our modern day utopias that are not limited to existing only in other spatial locations. The historian Bertel Nygaard has expressed it in the following way:

*'We modern human beings are different from our ancestors. We can't just imagine traveling to happiness or to experience happiness when we pass on from this life. We can also imagine the land of happiness becoming reality in the future and within the same world that we inhabit here and now'*²

1: Oxford Dictionary, 2010

2: Eksistens, 2015 [translated by author]



Fig 01

Dante's Paradise by Gustave Doré. c. 1864.



Fig 02

The Golden Man [El Dorado] by Theodor de Bry. 1599.



Fig 03

Columbus Arriving in America by L. Prang & Co. 1893.

The modern idea of utopia is not just based on location but also on time. Nygaard calls this the 'time utopia' and argues that the ability to imagine it is linked to our condition as humans in the modern age. He argues that existence in the modern world means that we have absorbed the experience of constant, permanent change, and thus through an understanding that human beings have the ability to shape their own lives and the world around them, can imagine a future utopia¹. The difference between the 'time utopia' and the utopian fantasy of the past has immense influence on how the idea of utopia can be used. The previous ideas of utopia as a place that could only be travelled or transcended into after death, is replaced by the idea that utopia can conceivably be created by man. Utopia in this way is not just the paradise dictated by God or providence but the good place as imagined by man. This new definition means that utopia can be presented as a vision for the future, be it politically, socially or even spatially and architecturally.

1: Eksistens, 2015

2.2 The relationship between utopia and architecture

When looking at different utopian fantasies the societies depicted vary immensely. From Plato's Republic and More's Utopia to visions from the twentieth century where communism and even fascism presented ideas of what a perfect society should look like. These utopias are so fundamentally different that they might even be described as polar opposites. However, while utopias might be political opposites they still all inhabit space. Grosz points this out in her essay *Embodied Utopias*:

*'What Plato, Moore, and virtually every other thinker of utopia share, though the picture each presents of an ideal society fluctuates and varies immensely according to political ideologies, is this; the utopic is always conceived as a space, usually an enclosed and isolated space – the walled city, the isolated island, a political or agrarian self-contained organization, and thus a commonwealth. The space is self-regulating, autonomous from, though it may function alongside of and in exchange with, other states and regions.'*¹

1: Grosz, pp134-135,2001.

Grosz further argues that this emphasis on space and place is why the ‘*utopic has been a locus of the imagination and invention for architects*’¹. A similar argument is put forward by Nathaniel Coleman in his book *Utopia and Architecture* when he says:

*‘Utopia is an almost inescapable companion of architectural invention. Architectural projections and utopias are close relations: both argue against inadequate existing conditions while drawing upon the past to augur a transformed future envisioned as superior to the present’*²

Grosz seems to say that the utopian idea is framed by an architectural form – be it in the widest understanding of architecture as the means of shaping and creating space and place. While Coleman is saying that architectural invention and utopia use the same means for conjuring up a vision of the future. The relationship between architecture and utopia is in this way twofold: in the first instance architecture is a way of framing the utopian vision; in the second, architecture has an inherent utopian quality. This could maybe be described as ‘the architecture of utopia’ and ‘utopian architecture.’

1: Grosz, pp134-135,2001.

2: Coleman, p48,2005.

2.3 The conflict between utopia and architecture

If architectural invention and utopia are closely linked and utopian ideas always have a spatial or architectural framework, is it conceivable that architecture can construct the utopian? This is one of the key questions Grosz asks in *Embodied Utopias*. Grosz, however, approaches this question from a different angle. She argues that while elements of architecture are intrinsic to the utopian fantasy this is also detrimental to the manifestation of that vision. The physical manifestation – the ‘embodiment’ as Grosz calls it – is, according to her, irreconcilable with the utopian vision. In other words, imagined spaces are tied to utopia but there is a discrepancy between real, physical spaces and utopias. Grosz argues the following:

‘The utopic is beyond a conception of space or place because the utopic, ironically, cannot be regarded as topological at all. It does not conform to the logic of spatiality. It is thus conceivable, and perhaps even arguable, that the utopic is beyond the architectural (...) Architecture remains out of touch with the fundamental movement of the utopic, the movement to perfection or to the ideal, which is adequately conceivable only in the temporal dimension and above all in the temporal modality of the future’¹

1: Grosz, p134,2001

It must be noted that Grosz's understanding of utopia is one of temporality. Grosz sees the utopic as an idealised version of the past and present rather than an image of the future:

*'The utopian is not the projection of the future at all, although this is how it is usually understood; rather, it is the projection of a past or present as if it were the future. The utopian is in fact a freezing of the indeterminable movement from the past through the future that the present is unable to directly control'*¹

In other words, the utopian vision is based on the past and present rather than the future and it is dependant on the conditions of that present. When '*architecture remains out of touch with the movement of the utopic*'² it is because the physical, static manifestation of architecture is not evolving with the creation of new utopian ideals.

1: Grosz, p134,2001

2: Grosz, p134,2001

Another aspect to this is that each individual utopian ideal itself is timeless and by definition static. Utopia signals the end of history or as Grosz puts it: '*Utopia has no future, the future has already come as its present (which is why utopia has no place, but also, even more ironically, why it has no time: the utopic is that which is out of time)*'¹

The utopian proposes to be the final genius solution to all problems and for this reason there would be no desire or need to move beyond it. What makes this statement false in the context of a physical reality is, as Grosz point out, that utopia is only a solution to the problems of the present and past. Similar thoughts about the evolving nature of utopia has been described by the philosopher Ernst Bloch in his book *The Principle of Hope*, where he describes how people throughout history and around the world have imagined different utopias in different ways at different times. A symbolic manifestation of this is Max Bill's sculpture *Endlose Treppe* – endless staircase – that represents the endless set of steps (utopias) on the path towards the final, pinnacle of perfection (see fig. 04).

1: Grosz, p140,2001

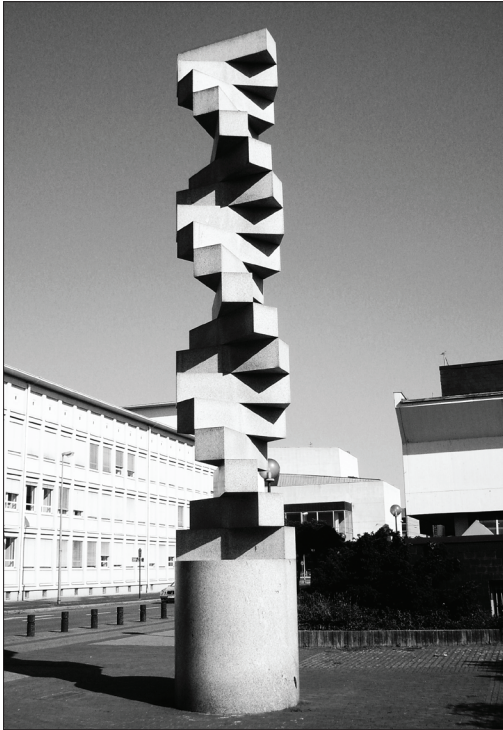


Fig.04

*Endlose Treppe by Max Bill. 1991.
The steps are supposed to represent Ernst Bloch's
principle of hope and the changing perceptions of
the utopian.*

The notion that the utopian vision is one that is constantly evolving, while at the same time proposing eternal solutions at each step, is the reason that physical manifestations or embodiment of utopia is problematic. In terms of utopian architecture this is not just a problem of obsolescence in the sense that a design is no longer an appropriate or ideal solution to a condition, but that the utopian idea naturally resists change. Utopia as an implemented condition assumes that no person shall divert from its framework or even feel a desire to do so. It is after all the ideal solution and therefore prescriptive in its manifestation¹. Nygaard describes this as the tyrannical tendency that is often connected to utopian thinking² and which for Grosz is the slippage into dystopia². Grosz argues that this condition inevitably results in an architecture of direct control: “*Architecture as that which directly or neutrally facilitates the subject’s control over its political and natural environment, an architecture of political inflexibility.*”³

1: Eksistens, 2015

2: Eksistens, 2015

3: Grosz, p135,2001

4: Grosz, p135,2001

2.4 *Why seek the utopian?*

Returning to the initial question: Is it possible that architecture could construct the utopian? It is indeed possible for an architecture to be constructed which is ideal for a given context or purpose; a utopian architecture. It is also possible for an architecture to facilitate a utopian vision. What Grosz points out is that this utopian state will be temporary, and that after its moment has passed the physical architectural manifestation will act as a device which locks and retains an undesirable, outdated or even repressive condition. If this is the case, this conclusion begs the question of why it would be desirable to pursue a utopian architecture or indeed utopias in a wider context? To answer this I believe that utopia must be viewed as a project rather than a goal. The utopian vision can be a driver of change, a focused struggle towards a better state of existence. This vision might change perpetually but it will always indicate a point to steer towards. The realisation of a utopia might result in the repression of individuals and inhibit possibilities, but the same is true if we accept the current state of society or architecture as the best possible. If we become complacent with the current state of things we are eliminating the process of history, time and change in the same way the tyrannical utopia does. The utopian vision is precisely what keeps us from instigating a static finality to reality by suggesting that a better reality can be imagined.

The spatial conditions of utopia

3.1 Islands as a spatial setting for utopia

Utopias are usually associated with a setting or site – even if this might be a generic or unspecific site. As Grosz points out in *Embodied Utopias* ‘*the utopic is always conceived as a space*’¹. Traditionally these spaces are according to Grosz, ‘*isolated spaces – the walled city, the isolated island, a political or agrarian self-contained organization, and thus a commonwealth*’². Professor Penny Boumelha discusses similar kinds of place in her essay *Regeneration*, where she describes traditional utopian spaces as ‘*remote islands surrounded by sea, concealed enclaves, pastoral enclosures, walled cities*.’³ According to Boumelha, these locations in fiction are symbolic of the ideological or conceptual difference from the reader’s known world³ and therefore intrinsic to the understanding of utopia. Additionally Jameson describes utopia as ‘*constitutively related to the possibility of establishing some spatial closure*’⁵. This marks an important link between utopia and location and suggests that a certain category of space is required for the utopian fantasy to unfold. Both Grosz and Boumelha mention spaces that are characterised by isolation and definition as their common qualities; spaces that delineate a limited and self-contained setting wherein the utopian can unfold.

1: Grosz, pp134-135,2001

2: Grosz, p135,2001

3: West-Sooby, p126,2008

4: West-Sooby, p126,2008

5: Jameson, p155,1981

Part of the compilation *On Representation* is dedicated to discussing the setting of More's Utopia and analysing its importance. More's Utopia is famously located on an island by the same name and is in this way sited in a confined, limited and isolated setting. The philosopher Louis Marin describes and explains the choice of setting in the following way:

*'Between the Ocean, which is the limit of the unknown and impassable, and the continent, which is equated with the known world and with civilization, there are mediating lands known as islands, which belong to both, geographically, psychologically, and perhaps metaphysically. In a way, they are at the limit of the world, neither beyond it nor within it (...). An island is a mark of boundary and difference (...) in itself a small world, since the island in the ocean, at its outer edge, is what the inhabited world is to the impassable unknown that surrounds it. (...) An island is the original repetition of the difference of the world from its unthinkable exterior, a difference that can henceforth be conceptualized'*¹

1: Hamacher and Welbery p99,2001

Marin argues that the island as a kind of separate world offers a location where something different can be imagined. In More's book the creation of Utopia is both the creation of the island Utopia and the state Utopia. The state of separation, limitation and the notion of a new world are linked to the conceptualisation of More's Utopia. The qualities Marin attaches to the island, as a setting, is arguably also applicable to the locations mentioned by Grosz and Boumelha: the walled city, the concealed enclave, the pastoral enclosure etc. These sites share the same island qualities that are mentioned by Marin – be it with varying degrees of interpretation. The walled city for example is also '*a mark of boundary and difference*' and '*in itself a small world*'¹. It could be suggested that if the spatial settings for utopias all have the common characteristics of separation, limited geographical or conceptual zoneing, and the notional potential of being a world within a world, then the island is an apt catchall metaphor. This metaphorical island would be descriptive of the spatial condition in which the utopian could be imagined; a contrasting element in a uniform mass; an area with a clear boundary that distinguishes it from what is around it and thereby defines it as another place; areas, circumstances, pockets or moments that do not comply with the conventional geographical sense of the term island, but have the condition of separation, isolation and definition in common.

1: Hamacher and Welbery, p99,2001

3.2 Metaphorical islands

The island, either as metaphor of geographical entity, has previously been used as a setting that could describe concepts like otherness, the creation of new ideas and new beginnings. Amongst the authors discussing islands as such is the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze wrote about islands as *'imaginary and mythological as well as real but above all as creative interruptions'*¹.

In his essay *Desert Islands*, Deleuze introduces the reader to the observation that there are two kinds of islands, continental and oceanic:

*'Continental islands are accidental, derived islands. They are separated from the continent, born of disarticulation, erosion, fracture; they survive the absorption of once contained them. Oceanic islands are originary, essential islands. Some are formed from coral reefs and display a genuine organism. Others emerge from underwater eruptions, bringing to the light of day a movement from the lowest depths'*²

1: Williams, p218,2001

2: Lapoujade, p9,2004

Here Deleuze describes islands as places that have either broken free from the mass of the continent or have emerged without context in the ocean. In either case there is a creation of new land. Deleuze sees these islands as opportunities to re-create the world in what he calls a second origin¹. In other words the island, as new land, offers an opportunity to re-invent or re-imagine the world. Or as the author Steward Williams puts it ‘*For Deleuze they [islands] exemplify becoming ‘other’ since they constituted through the outside and open to difference*’². It should be pointed out that Deleuze does not necessarily view islands as geographical entities. At least this is not the essence of his conception of the island: “*the essence of the deserted island is imaginary and not actual, mythological and not geographical*”³. In other words, Deleuze is using the geographical island as a metaphor for a setting or condition.

Deleuze never directly describes this setting as being connected with imaginings of the specifically utopian. He describes the fantasies that are associated with the island, or made possible by the island, as mythological³ and these myths are “*subject to those human conditions that make mythology possible*”⁴

1: Lapoujade, p12,2004

2: Williams, p219,2012

3: Lapoujade, p11,2004

4: Lapoujade, p12,2004

This means that the island can also be subject to what he calls the failed mythology; that which fails to be an imagining of anything out of the ordinary. One such failed mythology is, according to Deleuze, Daniel Defoe's famous story of Robinson Crusoe:

*"Robinson's vision of the world resides exclusively in property; never have we seen an owner more ready to preach. The mythical recreation of the world from the deserted island gives way to the reconstitution of everyday bourgeois life from a reserve of capital. Everything is taken from the ship. Nothing is invented. It is all painstakingly applied on the island. (...) Robinson's companion is not Eve, but Friday, docile towards work, happy to be a slave, and too easily disgusted by cannibalism. Any healthy reader would dream of seeing him eat Robinson."*¹

Deleuze's disappointment with Defoe's novel stems from the missed opportunity that Robinson represents. When faced with the possibility of re-imagining and re-creating the world on the island, the shipwrecked Robinson simply reinstates all the known aspects of bourgeois life. Not even the cannibalistic Friday manages to shake this fantasy into something more fanciful. The example of Robinson shows how the island as Deleuze sees it does not necessarily generate the extraordinary, mythological or utopian but simply that it offers the opportunity, setting and conditions to do so.

1: 4: Lapoujade, p12,2004



Fig 05. A geographical continental island - The island Asinara



Fig 06. A geographical oceanic island - The island Nauru

3.3 The urban context

Grosz, Boumelha and Marin have given indications that the utopian has a connection with, or even requires, conditions that are island-like in their characteristics. Deleuze is describing how islands, as geological occurrences and metaphors come into existence and the opportunities they offer for the imagination. But what are these island-like spaces or areas in the context of the modern city?

Deleuze states that there are two types of islands: the continental and the oceanic. The continental is that which has drifted away from the continent and the oceanic that which is 'radical and absolute' in its origin¹. This tells us about the origin of islands. Marin on the other hand describes what islands are: '*mediating lands that are at the limit of the world, neither beyond it nor within it.*'² Grosz and Boumelha's islands, or island-like scenarios are all characterised by isolation and defined spatiality.

If the descriptions of islands by these four sources are combined and examined in the context of the city, the kind of space that is depicted shares certain kinships with Michelle Foucault's notion of the *heterotopia*. In his essay *Of Other Spaces* Foucault describes the heterotopia in following way:

1: Lapoujade, p10,2004

2: Hamacher and Welbery, p99,2001

*'There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias'*¹

Foucault describes the heterotopia as a place that is absolutely different from its context; a counter-site where the rules of a society are reflected, contested and inverted². As concrete examples of heterotopias Foucault mentions the cemetery, the cinema, the museum and the festival.

1: Foucault, p3,1984

2: Foucault, p3,1984

Each of these four examples have specific heterotopic qualities or functions that make them other with regards to the environment they are set within. That is: the separation of the living and the dead (the cemetery); the juxtaposition of incompatible spaces (the cinema's linking of real and virtual space); the concentrated accumulation of time (the museum); and the instatement of absolute temporality (the festival). These four heterotopias '*are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality*'¹. They are part of the city, but also external to it through their exceptional functions and modes of existence. In general, these sites are also subject to a mode of isolation and not freely accessible, '*to get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures*'² as Foucault puts it.

In this sense, the heterotopia is an example of a kind of metaphorical island within the city. But the heterotopia is not a desert island in the Deleuzian sense as a space for re-inventing the world. Foucault characterizes the heterotopia as having '*a precise and determinate function within a society*'³ and its utopian possibility as a space is in this way already exhausted. Foucault even describes the heterotopia as '*a kind of enacted utopia*'⁴; that is to say that the heterotopia already represents an alternative ordering of society or space – be this an imagining of the ideal, in the utopian sense, or not.

As a spatial category the heterotopia describes spaces that are different from the other spaces that exist in a given society, but through established, alternative functions. When Deleuze is describing the emergence of continental and oceanic islands we are looking at new land, spaces of opportunity that do not yet have a function or connection to what is around them - a blank slate, so to speak.

1: Foucault, p3,1984

2: Foucault, p11,1984

3: Foucault, p5,1984

4: Foucault, p3,1984

If this condition cannot exactly be found in the term heterotopia it is certainly related to the idea of *tabula rasa*. The notion of *tabula rasa* is originally linked to the philosophical tradition that favours the view that the mind is born without any mental content and as a result all knowledge is gathered through learning and experience. In an urban context *tabula rasa* is rarely if ever an actual and complete condition of a site. A site can arguably always be said to have some pre-existing context, be this physical, environmental, historical, geographical or even spiritual. In this way, it makes more sense to talk about *tabula rasa* as a tactic rather than as a condition; where a site is approached *as if* there was no context to consider¹.

The *tabula rasa* tactic enables some of the same openness for imagination that Deleuze's islands do. Indeed, there is often a close connection between the strategy of *tabula rasa* and utopian visions. Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* that involved demolishing large parts of central Paris is an example of the *tabula rasa* tactic's association with utopian ambition. *Tabula rasa* makes it possible to imagine a complete rebirth and re-creation of the world but only through the false assumption that context does not exist. *Tabula rasa*, as previously stated, is a tactic and not a condition, like the Deleuzian islands.

1: Maudlin and Vellinga, p238,2014



Fig 07. The heterotopia of the cemetery



Fig. 08. The heterotopia of cinema

If Foucault's heterotopia isn't exactly the island-like setting for the utopian because these 'other spaces' already are defined by function, and the *tabula rasa* tactic cannot be viewed as a condition, then perhaps a combination of the two terms can approach the question of what the setting for utopian imaginations is. This is arguably what has been done when the architect and theorist Ignasi de Solà-Morales coined the term *terrain vague* in his essay of the same name from 1995. The term arose around an earlier movement in photography that focused on abandoned, obsolete and disused spaces within the city, but Solà-Morales used it to create a new category of urban space: one that could describe areas that did not follow the conventional productive logic of the city; areas with no apparent practical use. Solà-Morales writes of the *terrain vague*:

*'Unincorporated margins, interior islands void of activity, oversights, these areas are simply un-inhabited, un-safe, un-productive. In short, they are foreign to the urban system, mentally exterior in the physical interior of the city, its negative image, as much a critique as a possible alternative (...) These strange places exists outside of the city's productive economic circuits and productive structures (...) The relationship between the absence of use, of activity, and the sense of freedom, of expectancy is fundamental to understanding the evocative potential of the city's terrains vagues.'*¹

1: Davidson, p120,1995.

Terrain vague in more specific terms is often related to places such as derelict industrial sites, ruins, abandoned areas etc. In a comparison between *terrain vague* and *tabula rasa* it is clear that both terms deal with a condition of openness, but while the first concerns openness immanent to a context and in relation to real existing conditions, the second describes artificial openness¹. Perhaps *terrain vague* could be successfully described as heterotopic, but unlike the definitions of this term as given by Foucault, *terrain vague* does not have a ‘*determinate function within a society*’². In this way the label of *terrain vague* is descriptive of a spatial condition that has characteristics that are somewhere in between the *tabula rasa* approach and the heterotopic; a kind of heterotopia, in the sense of other space, but without any obvious purpose. Of course the lack of obvious purpose does not mean that the *terrain vague* is without value or interest, but is exactly the quality that makes it differ from its adjacent urban context. In Solà-Morales own words the qualities inherent in this absence is that, in contrast to the rest of the city, we are able to project both our fears and expectations upon these spaces:

*‘Strangers in our own land, strangers in our city, we inhabitants of the metropolis feel the spaces not dominated by architecture as reflections of our own insecurity, of our vague wanderings through limitless space that, in our position external to the urban system, to power, to activity, constitute both physical expression of our fear and insecurity and our expectation of the other, the alternative, the utopian, the future’*³

1: Maudlin and Vellinga, p238,2014

2: Foucault, p5,1984

3: Davidson, p121,1995.

When Solà-Morales writes that we are external to the urban system, to power and to activity it is an expression of his belief that we live in, as he puts it, '*an epoch of strangeness in front of the world*'¹. That is to say a time with a '*fleeting relationship between the subject and his/her world*'²; a relationship we have very little control over and thus results in alienation between the inhabitants of the city and the city itself. In the *terrain vague* Solà-Morales sees a setting for imagining the alternative, the utopians and the future on our own terms.

As a spatial category *terrain vague* exhibits many similar conditions to those of the utopian island as described by Grosz, Boumelha, Marin and Deleuze respectively. It is a place where imaginings of difference can happen, including the utopian fantasy. It is separated from the surrounding city in economic, practical and functional terms, but within it in terms of geography; a 'mediating land' in Marin's terms. It is harder to determine whether a *terrain vague* is an isolated location and whether isolation should always be understood as physical isolation. If isolation is understood as detachment or separation from something else then the *terrain vague* is isolated from the remaining city. If isolation is only understood as remoteness and inaccessibility then the answer will be dependent upon the specific *terrain vague*. In either case we see a setting that is open for imagining the utopian unlike the heterotopia, and displays this openness in a genuine context unlike *tabula rasa*.

1: Davidson, p121,1995.

2 Davidson, p121,1995.



Fig 09. A terrain Vague - Québec, 2011.



Fig 10. A terrain Vague - Québec, 2011.



Fig 11. A terrain Vague - Helsinki, 2014.



Fig 12. A terrain Vague - Helsinki, 2014.

Episodic architecture

4.1 *Absolute temporality and architecture as utopian project*

In the two previous chapters we have looked at the troubled yet essential relationship between the utopian and architecture; we have examined the traditional spatial setting of the utopian fantasy and we have discussed the urban settings in which utopia can be imagined. This chapter will now turn to the question of how utopian architectures might be realised with these findings in mind.

Through the writings of Elizabeth Grosz it has been argued that utopia is not a singular, final ideal, but rather a projection of an idealised present into the future by individuals. It has also been discussed how the element of time perpetually changes the nature of the utopian, and changes what was utopian into the dystopian. Utopia is in this way a multiplicity and not a singular undertaking that can be finalised and completed; a multiplicity of individual ideals and projections at different times. Grosz describes the situation in the following way:

*'The very acknowledgement of the multiplicity of bodies and their varying political interests and ideals implies that there are a multiplicity of idealized solutions to living arrangements, arrangements about collective coexistence, but it is no longer clear that a single set of relations, a single goal or ideal, will ever adequately serve as the neutral ground for any consensual utopic form'*¹

1: Grosz, p133,2001

Indeed, the very idea of a consensual utopian ideal is absurd according to Grosz, as utopias are often expressions of desire about how the few create and enforce a consensus *over* the many, not *with* the many¹. This again illustrates how the utopian is closely related to the tyrannical, to reiterate Nygaard's point from chapter one. For the utopian to act as a positive and not as a tool of repression it must always be questioned. Grosz offers the following idea as to how the conception of the utopian might be modified:

*'Ideals need to be produced over and over again, and their proliferation and multiplication is an ongoing process, always a measure of dissatisfaction with the past and present, always the representation of ever-receding futures. The task for architecture, as for philosophy, is not to settle on utopias, models, concrete ideals, but instead to embark on the process of endless questioning'*²

1: Grosz, p133,2001

2: Grosz, p133,2001

In the realms of philosophy and theory the endless questioning of the utopian ideal is not particularly hard to imagine. These are after all fields of debate, argument and questioning. Architecture, on the other hand, deals with more than the purely theoretical. This leads back to Grosz's earlier argument that architecture (architecture as physical built form) '*remains out of touch with the fundamental movement of the utopic*'¹. The utopian as Grosz sees it, is a temporal dimension, and so architecture that seeks to build or embody the utopian, and thereby make utopia permanent, almost inevitably produces the dystopian, an architecture of repression, an architecture of direct control².

To summarise and simplify this argument, it could be said that the utopian, to remain so, must incorporate change and the temporal, while architecture is usually understood in terms of permanence and immobility. This notion can certainly be challenged in the sense that both temporality and permanence can be viewed as relative terms. In the grander scope of history, temporality can be anything from mere moments to hundreds of years, while permanence, in the context of architecture, does not concern millennia but more often centuries at the very most. In this way it cannot be determined exactly how temporal a utopian notion is or how permanent a structure is. When Grosz advocates that '*ideals need to be produced over and over again*'³ it could therefore be argued that embodiment or building architecture is not necessarily problematic in this context. In this way the schism between utopia and embodiment might not necessarily as unbreachable as it is suggested.

Here it might again be useful to look at the settings necessary for imagining utopian architecture. For even if architecture can embody the utopian, its very presence limits the ability to imagine other utopias.

1: Grosz, p134,2001

2: Grosz, p135,2001

3: Grosz, p135,2001

These conditions were examined in the previous chapter and are expressed rather pointedly by Rem Koolhaas in his essay *Imagining Nothingness*: ‘Where there’s nothing, everything is possible. Where there is architecture, nothing (else) is possible.’¹ This calls for an approach that negotiates the element of time in a way that is conducive both to the imagination and the realisation of the imagined; time as a considered, dimensional aspect of architecture. This brings us to a discussion of how this element of time might be incorporated into architecture in practical terms and what its deliberate application results in. To examine this a look at the work of Cedric Price might illustrate some of the answers. Price viewed time as the fourth dimension of architecture – length, width and height being the others. Many of his projects sought to introduce time as ‘an attempt to break down static structural systems’² and as a way of ‘incorporating changing conditions’³. One of Price’s most famous projects, the unrealised Fun Palace from 1961, is an expression of this. It was conceived as a highly temporal, time and site-specific intervention that according to Price was only relevant at one particular moment in time. This expresses Price’s view that buildings become redundant and are time specific, and he thus advocates that a fixed lifetime should be considered in architecture and in design at large:

‘The acceptance of redundancy of design by the designer is essential. At present it is left to the rest of the community to do this. However, until the designer becomes concerned with determining the rate of redundancy of his design – not merely the life of the product – we will continue to electrify the grandfather clock rather than hand out wrist watches’⁴

1: Koolhaas, p54, 1985

2: Keiller and Obrist, p46, 1999

3: Keiller and Obrist, p46, 1999

4: Keiller and Obrist, p103, 1999

Like Grosz, Price advocates that practitioners of architecture should acknowledge time as an element in design – and not merely in the sense of the building's or, as Price puts it, product's lifetime; that is to say not purely in the sense of its physical ability to last, be this in terms of structural integrity, environmental performance or other practical parameters. The element of time should be introduced as a means of ensuring, what Grosz called, the '*process of constant questioning*'¹. To express this notion with a term that differentiates itself from the previously observed relative temporality and permanence of all architecture, I will label this 'absolute temporality'. Absolute temporality is a finite period of time that is not subject to interpretation. An example of absolute temporality can be seen in the conditions set out by Cedric Price for the construction of his InterAction Centre from 1976 in Kentish Town, London. The InterAction Centre, a sort of community activity building, was designed on the condition that it only had a twenty year life span². As part of the design, Price included a manual for the structure's dismantling. Such a radical approach to design could be seen as a way of maintaining the utopian as an on-going project, rather than as a finite goal; a way of approaching and acknowledging design as a set of highly provisional solutions³, that would be obliged to be re-negotiated and re-invented according to a time-based schedule.

1: Keiller and Obrist, p133, 1999

2: Design Museum, 2015

3: Grosz, p147,2001

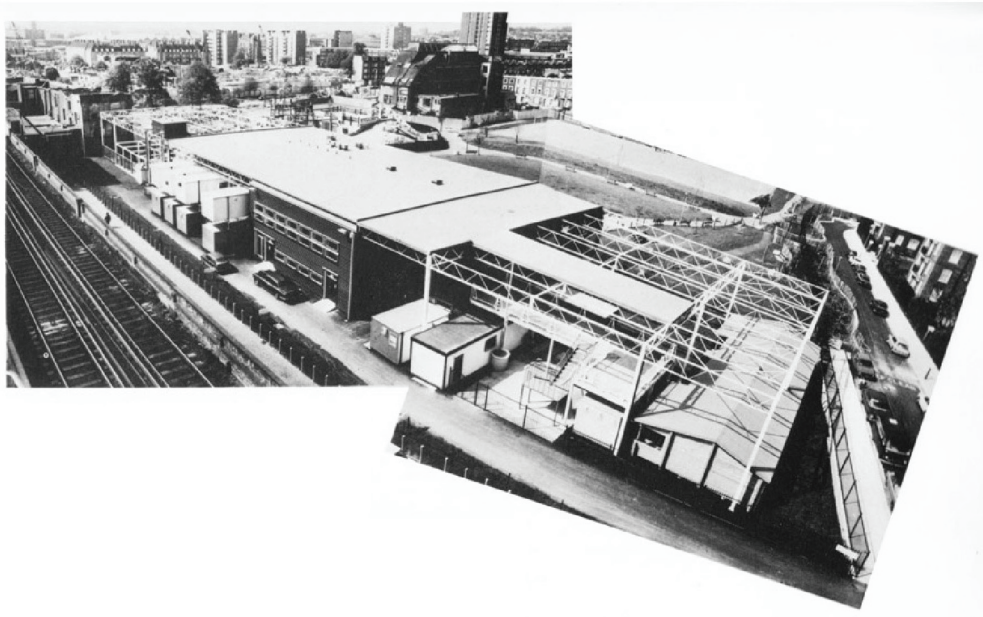


Fig. 13. The InterAction Centre by Cedric Price. Kentish Town London (Date of photograph unknown).

4.2 The festival as an expression of 'episodic architecture'

Another example of a spatial configuration that is bound to the concept of 'absolute temporality' is the festival. A festival is of course an event that occurs on a yearly, biannual or otherwise regular basis and exists for a limited amount of time, usually at the same location. In most cases it is associated with an infrastructure of some kind, around which the structures that support the given celebration are built. These structures can be the same year after year or they can be completely replaced. In either case the festival is re-built and can in this way be re-imagined every season.

A festival that has become particularly well known for its cyclical existence of re-construction and subsequent dismantling is the Burning Man festival in the Black Rock Desert, Nevada. The festival was moved to this location in 1991 and takes place in the so-called Black Rock City: A city built 110 miles into the desert, purely for and by the participants of the festival. In 2014 there were just under 70,000 participants, or 'inhabitants,' of Black Rock City, during the seven days the city existed. So far there have been thirteen incarnations of Black Rock City, with the first 'city' only hosting 250 people. The latest manifestation of Black Rock City was in terms of planning very similar to a conventional North American city. There was a grid street structure, zoning regulations, street lighting, an airport and many element of soft infrastructure; i.e. security, health services, fire department, childcare, post office etc.

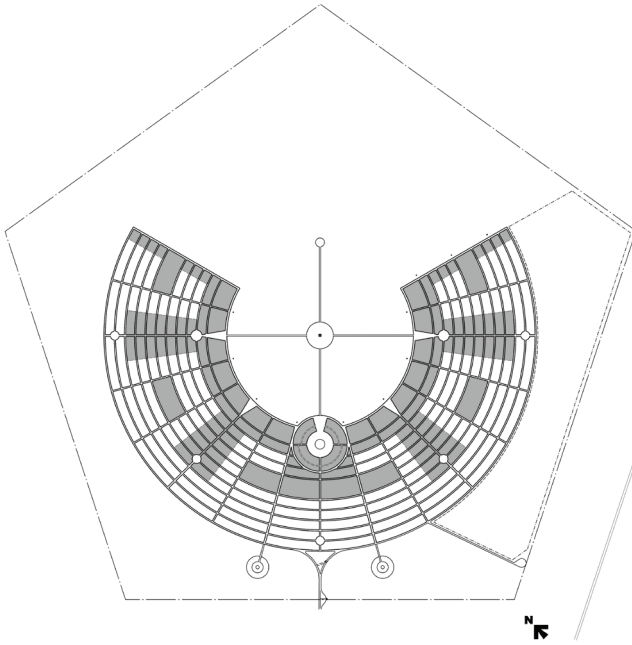
In relation to utopia and the concept of 'absolute temporality' there are at least two elements of the Burning Man festival that are interesting to observe. Firstly, the utopian element: every year it is possible, indeed necessary, to imagine a new and ideal version of Black Rock City on the basis of the previous and current version. Secondly that this is made possible by the condition of 'absolute temporality'.

In her book *On the Edge of Utopia* the author Rachel Bowditch describes Burning Man as not being a utopia per se but a '*rehearsal of a utopian ideology*'¹. In her book Bowditch describes how the festival organisers each year are reviewing the functionality of the Black Rock City; from the early iterations where the city was entirely unplanned and without coordination to the more current versions that are carefully designed. In 1999 the city took on a circular, crescent shaped form – coincidentally not entirely unlike More's description of his Utopian island (see fig 14). From the centre of this crescent shape the streets of the city fan out with regular intervals. The result is similar to the layout of a Panopticon and the intended functionality also alike (see fig.16). The design innovations of the city's planning have mainly been driven by security concerns and attempts to regulate visitors' behaviours, but also to optimise Black Rock City in relation to the desert environment – mainly to control the impact of sand storms.

1: Bowditch, p77,2010

Bowditch describes Burning Man using the words of anarchist author Hakim Bey, as '*a spontaneous yet intentional community, living outside the boundaries of everyday life*'.¹ Being, in this sense, a counter-cultural event, occurrences take place that are not acceptable or legal in a more conventional context, let alone under the jurisdictions of the Nevada state. At Burning Man this is mainly in relation to drug usage and public indecency but also more immediately dangerous crimes like reckless driving and firing of guns inside the city. The optimisation of the city planning has made it possible to omit, discourage and discover offences, both to satisfy the law but also to ensure safe and successful cohabitation for the inhabitants. With the huge increase in participants of the festival over the past 20 years the measures required to ensure successful cohabitation have of course changed. The anarchic, chaotic lawlessness of the early festivals with a few hundred participants might not have been as joyful once the numbers soared to several thousands. Whether the changes of the city described here are utopian in their vision or merely a way of regulating behaviour according to the law is not entirely clear. The changing city plan is however an attempt at continuously improving the festival in the face of changing circumstances - with the ultimate goal being one of utopian free, peaceful, coexistence.

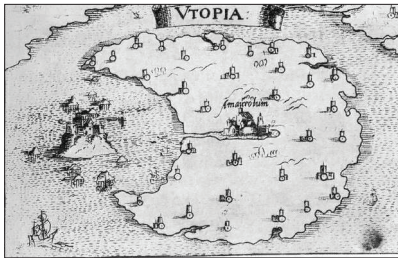
1: Bowditch, p85,2010



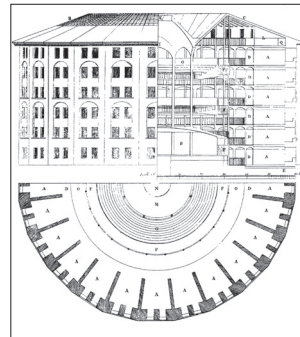
Plan of the Black Rock City, 2010.

The plan of the city is coincidentally similar to that of More's island Utopia (below). It functions in a similar way to Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison (below).

Fig.14



*Fig.15. More's crescent shaped island; Utopia.
Unknown artist. Unknown date.*



*Fig.16. Bentham's Panopticon. From the centre the prison guard can keep all inmates under surveillance - while they can't see each other.
Wiley Reveley, 1791.*

In many ways the Burning Man festival performs according to the parameters Grosz has noted as being vital for a functional utopia: ideals are continuously re-produced in an on going process of measuring dissatisfaction with the past and present.¹ Similar in its 'absolutely temporal' condition to Price's InterAction centre each iteration of the Black Rock City has an acceptance of its own redundancy; a redundancy tied to the length of the festival – but also to the acceptance that next year's event will, and should, be different based on new circumstances in the past and present.

Both the InterAction centre and Burning man in their 'absolute temporality' could be described as events; a single occurrence that is never to repeat. The philosopher and theorist on time Henri-Louis Bergson noted that each *'temporal event is new and can not reoccur'*² but also that *'we treat certain events as though they recurred, simply because there are other events more or less like them'*³. Such could also be described the difference between the InterAction centre and Burning Man: The InterAction centre as a single event was not to ever occur again and as such served a finite, temporal purpose. Burning Man or the Black Rock City appears to reoccur based on the notion that each iteration or event has similarities with the previous. As such there are 'absolutely temporal' events that never reoccur, and 'absolutely temporal' events that *seem* to reoccur – or in Bergson's terminology: single unique events that have a liking to other unique events. This particular difference between the InterAction centre, as a single event, and Black Rock City, as a reoccurring event, could be described as a single event versus an episodic event.

1: Grosz, p133,2001

2: Burke, p92,1984

3: Burke, p92,1984

This distinction gives rise to what I will call 'episodic architecture' - an architecture of separate episodes or events. What Burning Man illustrates is that such an architecture is capable of being submitted to constant questioning and perpetual re-imagination. It is an architecture of process rather than finality, that encourages imagining and re-imagining a better future based on negotiations with past experiences and present conditions.



Fig. 17. Black Rock City seen from above. 2011.



Fig. 18. The 'temple'. A temporary structure in Black Rock City, 2011.

4.3 *New Babylon as an interrogation of 'episodic architecture'*

To further exemplify, explore and critically examine the term 'episodic architecture' as a way of embodying or realising utopian architecture, the ambivalent utopian vision of Dutch architect Constant Nieuwenhuys can be investigated. Constant sought to create a vision of what he called '*architecture of situations*'¹ – an architecture that would allow a transformation of daily reality; an architecture that would itself instigate the creation of new situations². Constant was exploring these possibilities in his multifaceted project *New Babylon* (1959-74) – a provocative title playing on the Christian protestant concept of Babylon as the degenerate city of evil. New Babylon was to be a hedonistic society populated by 'the playing man' – *Homo Ludens* – whose primary purpose in life was leisure and self-fulfilment³. New Babylon was envisaged as a gigantic mega-structure above and across the surface of the earth. In a very literal way the city would leave the old world behind and create a new one, consisting of ephemeral constructions, moving walls, floors, staircases and bridges in a kind of mechanically orchestrated, constantly changing environment⁴. Constant divided this construct into a number of sectors that would act as highly manipulable neighbourhoods for 'the playing man.'

1: Ross, 1997

2: Ross, 1997

3: Goldhagen, 2006

4: Goldhagen, 2006

What is episodic about Constant's vision is seen in the descriptions of the habitat of this *Homo Ludens*. In the book *Architecture and Modernity* Hilde Heynen quotes Constant in the following way:

*"The sectors change through all the activities within them, they are constantly evolving in form and atmosphere. Nobody therefore will ever be able to return to a place that he visited previously, nobody will ever recognize an image that exists in his memory. This means that nobody will ever lapse into fixed habits"*¹

The technical specifications of Constant's city are not clearly clarified, but the result is a setting in which the inhabitant can directly modify, alter and influence his or her surroundings. As Constant proclaims, nobody will be able to visit a place he or she visited previously, and has complete freedom to re-imagine their surroundings according to needs and desires. Similarly to the Black Rock City of the Burning Man Festival, Constant's New Babylon is perpetually reinvented according to the needs and desires of the present and past. New Babylon is, however, an even more radical proposal than Black Rock City. Constant's vision envelops an entire world, a complete, all-encompassing environment where everything is changing in all locations, at all times. Divergently, Black Rock City is a single location that contrasts its contextual environment.

1: Heynen, p158,2000

Or in other words: while New Babylon is a world, Black Rock City could be said to be a world within a world. This difference is not just one of scope, but also a difference between a concept that exists within a context (Black Rock City) and one that no longer has any other context than itself (New Babylon). Heynen expresses a critique of this situation and its totality in the following way:

'The law of the transitory prevails in New Babylon. (...) The commonplace – the ordinary, everyday framework that gives life its form and permits one to postpone indefinitely any question about the ultimate meaning of life – has been abolished. With it the possibility of 'dwelling' has also disappeared. For dwelling (inhabiting) has to do with developing habits, with habituating oneself to a certain pattern, which is exactly what Constant is telling us is impossible in New Babylon. As a Utopian vision of the future, New Babylon therefore arouses feelings of dread rather than desire: dwelling in a situation of pure indeterminacy apparently does not respond to our deepest wishes and desires'¹

1: Heynen, p172,2000

Heynen's critique of the vision suggests that there is a deeply undesirable element connected with the concept of total, all-encompassing temporality as an architectural utopia. Again the question of how similar New Babylon is to the notion of episodic architecture can be raised – or perhaps more productively the question of where they differ. If 'episodic architecture' is understood similarly to Bergson's definition of the event, a single occurrence that never repeats, and as a reoccurring event, an occurrence that has other occurrences like it, then 'episodic architecture' must exhibit some similarities to its previous iterations, or episodes. In the example of Black Rock City the most obvious similarity might be programme, but even more specific is site: site as a particular location in a context of other locations – (unlike New Babylon that comprises all locations – and all purposes). The question of contextualisation seems to be a fundamental difference between episodic and total temporary architecture. If the unsettling elements of New Babylon stems from its totality and uninhibited, constant alteration of a whole world, then perhaps a contained, sited, contextualised and defined version would not arouse the feelings of dread that Heynen connects with the pure indeterminacy of New Babylon. This brings us back to the notion of settings for the utopian, which were discussed in chapter three, and reiterate the concept of the metaphorical island as a site for the utopian. In this case an island-like condition is also a way of containing and limiting the utopian vision.

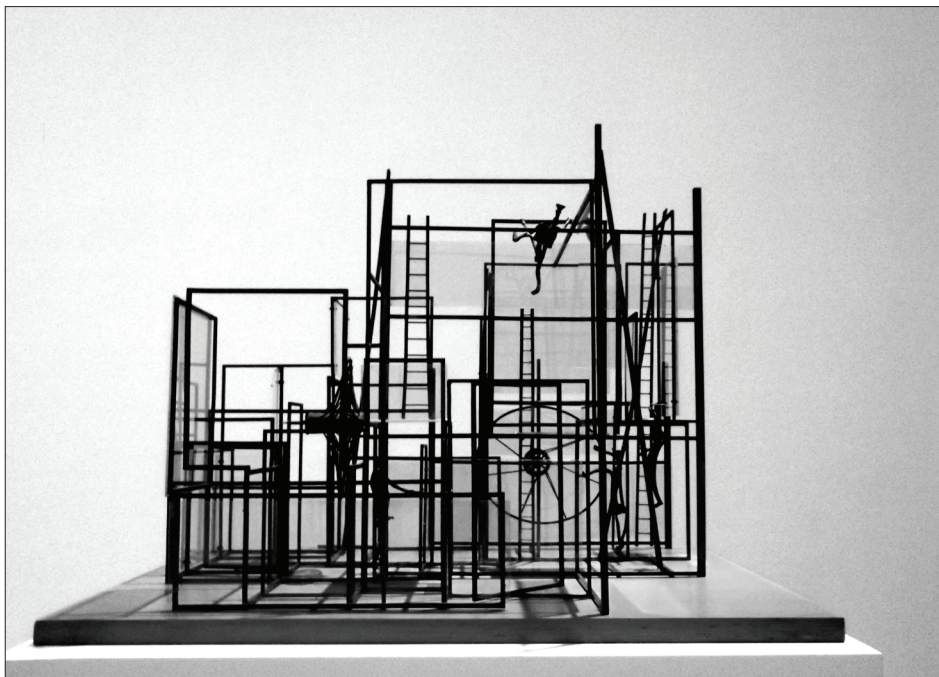


Fig. 19. A part of the New Babylon structure. Constant Nieuwenhuys. Date of model unknown.

Fig.01

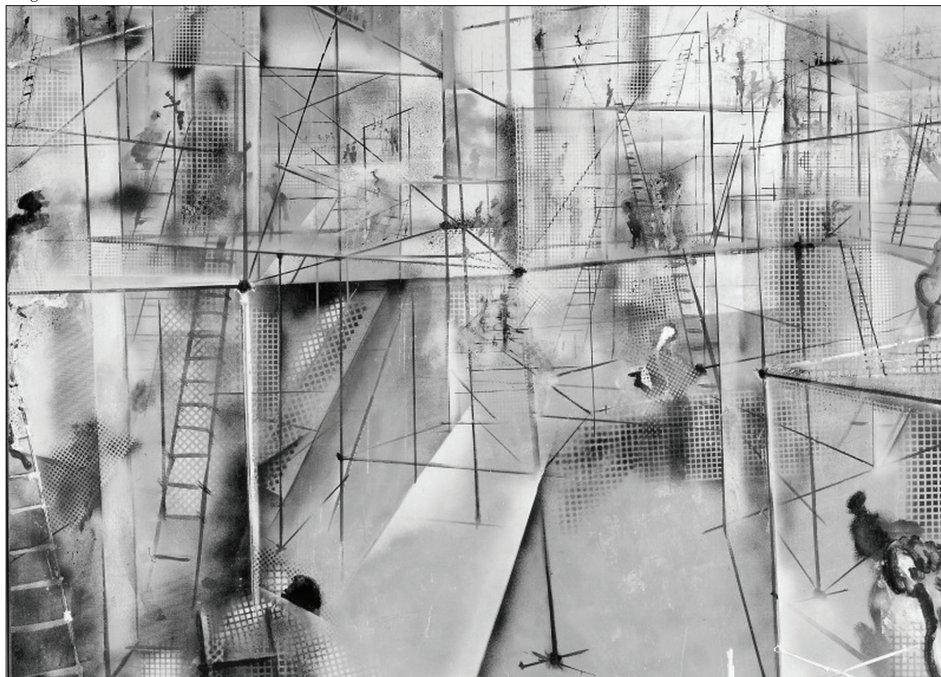


Fig. 20. A painting of New Babylon. Constant Nieuwenhuys. Title: Ode a l'Odeon. 1971.

4.4 Situating episodic architecture

If both contextuality as well as temporality are necessary characteristics for the realisation of a successful, lasting utopia, then the question of what utopia is also becomes a question of where, when, and for how long utopia lasts. In this way utopia can be seen as a highly time and site-specific entity that can go beyond the purely theoretical and potentially become a successful physical, embodied expression through the utilisation of these parameters. The parameters of time and place that we have seen exhibited firstly in the notion of the temporal and secondly in the metaphorical island, specifically in the spatial category of *terrain vague*, suggests that there are actual, real places within our cities that correspond to these specifications. The notion of time based buildings in the form of 'episodic architecture' gives a clue as to how these places can be occupied, without permanently altering them and at the same time ensure a form of architecture that addresses the dimension of time and the fluctuating visions of the utopian. The connection between 'episodic architecture' and *terrain vague* could in a sense be described as symbiotic, in opposition to the relationship between 'conventional architecture' and *terrain vague*, in which the production of the former usually results in the erasure of the latter. As Solà-Morales writes: '*Architecture's destiny has always been colonization, the imposing of limits, order, and form, the introduction into strange space the element of identity necessary to make it recognizable, identical, universal.*'¹

Contrary to this process of spatial colonisation, 'episodic architecture' is perpetually in a flux from one 'episode' to the next, and thus constantly re-negotiating the relationship between architecture and its site. This cycle is a reflection of what Grosz described as '*the process of endless questioning*'², where the utopian ideals are produced and re-produced continuously.

1: Davidson, p122,1995

2: Grosz, p133,2001

The examples of Price's InterAction Centre, Black Rock City and Constant's New Babylon show three examples of temporary architecture: The first architecture as the singular event, the second as 'episodic architecture' and the third, by means of a fictional project, an environment of total all-encompassing temporality. Price's work illustrate how the temporal 'event' is a response to one moment in time, the 'episodic architecture' shows how a series of events can respond to different moments in time and to altering conditions and ideals, while New Babylon gives a speculative indication that temporality in everything and everywhere can produce an undesirable state of pure indeterminacy. The three degrees of temporality illustrate the importance of a limited and contained site to spatially enclose the utopian setting. Or to clarify: New Babylon illustrates that temporality everywhere and in everything is not desirable. As such the site, as a limited spatial entity, acts as a contained setting that does not give rise to a reality of pure indeterminacy beyond its limits.

The propositional conclusion on how utopian architecture can be realised is in this way not just one regarding the notion of 'episodic architecture' but is also linked to ideas about setting and site. If 'episodic architecture' is a method of addressing the shifting visions of the utopian, the *terrain vague* can be a setting for imagining it.

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