
URBAN UTOPIA AND CENTRAL EUROPEAN REGION

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Abstract

The article analyses the issue of contemporary urban utopian discourse in relation to the region of Central Europe. The primary aim is to analyse the main features of the present-day urban utopian discourse and to give examples of this kind of vision of the future. The secondary aim, a more speculative and metaphorical one, is to draw attention to the function of urban utopias in Central European countries and to suggest the relevance of urban utopias created in Western countries for the post-socialist urban, economic and social conditions. The purpose of the article is to deal with the contemporary urban utopias in order to learn something about the near future of Central European region.

Keywords: utopia, urban, planning, architecture, Central Europe

1. Introduction

In brief, the article is concerned with the contemporary urban utopian discourse, the present state of Central European region as well as with its foreseeable future. It's based on three fundamental prerequisites. Firstly, there is an elementary difference between the most developed countries and Central European countries in many respects. Secondly, the contemporary urban utopia is not an impracticable or deranged fantasy – based on the present state it soberly estimates the future conditions. Thirdly, the urban condition is not solely limited to the architectural or urban planning issues, it consists of the superpositions of various aspects such as social, economic, political and environmental matters.

2. Urban utopian discourse

At the present time, urban utopias are in fashion once again. We are observing the rapid and acute proliferation of the way of thinking that is dealing with the concept of no-place (from the Greek *οὐ* - 'not' and *τόπος* – 'place') as it was coined by Thomas More in his book *Utopia* in 1516. We are facing the descendants of traditional notion of society that is planed out in a perfect and flawless way as designed in early utopian attempts of Bacon's *New Atlantis*, Campanella's *City of the Sun*, Owen's *New Harmony*, Fourier's *Phalanstère* and

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so on. In our case, it is undoubtedly a current issue among the architects and urban planners in the most developed countries and it is of great importance just like the social urban utopias in the early 20th century (Ebenezer Howard's garden city movement, Le Corbusier's modernist idea of *The radiant city*, F.L. Wright's concept of decentralized *Broadacre city*) as well as the utopian megastructures in the 1960s and the 1970s (Y. Friedman's mobile architecture of *The Spatial City*, Archigram's avant-garde *Plug-in-City* and *The Walking City*, Metabolism's *Ocean City* and *Space City*, or Superstudio's total urbanization of *The Continuous Monument*). Nowadays, we can literally speak of the third wave of modern urban utopias. So, what are the form and intention of the current urban utopias? What kind of utopian discourse is generated in the field of urban planning and architecture?

The urban utopian discourse under consideration began to grow in recent years in more or less unorganized ways – there are many scattered publications, projects and exhibitions in the field of architecture, urban planning as well as in visual and conceptual art, fiction, social theory and so on, processed in an academic form, professional way or just in a personal interest. We can easily follow up the high fermentation and shaping of these resources.

To specify this kind of utopian discourse we make a list of the most significant examples. First of all, there is an iconic collection of the current visions of utopian architecture and urbanism called *Utopia Forever* published in 2011 [1]. The projects in this book represent significant predictions of fundamental urban change and are radically redefining our vision of everyday life in the near future. They are coherently divided into five sections: *Great Scapes* consists of proposals for home building in inhospitable localities; *Rising Tides* deals with the problem of rising of sea levels; *Ecotopia Emerging* presents projects that apply green ecological approach to urban planning; *Technology Matters* reflects impact of technological development on architecture and city infrastructure; and finally, *Sky's the Limit* is concerned with vertical utopian visions above the ground. Some of the projects are just exercises in speculation while others are technically almost feasible, some are rather ironical, intimidating, foresightful and very lucid, other are focusing on society and environment's most urgent needs. *Utopia Forever* very aptly expresses the fact that our cities and homes are not sustainable in the way we are building and utilizing them, so we must look for solutions and ideas for our urban future. That is the main reason why the discussion about utopias is one of the most significant issues in contemporary architecture and urban planning.

In 2009 the prestigious journal *Architecture Design* prepared a special issue entitled *Architectures of the Near Future* in which we can find a variety of utopian and dystopian accounts of the contemporary architecture and life in the city. In her editorial, Helen Castle pointed out the inherent feature of the architect's practice: "No discipline has been propelled forward more by the promise of the onward march of progress than architecture. Since the early 20th century, architects and designers have been smitten by the novel and the new. To this day, architecture as a discipline continues to judge itself on these terms,

piling approbations on its star players that reflect these criteria: cutting-edge, avant-garde, innovative, experimental and ground-breaking.” [2] In this respect, the architecture and urban planning are inherently utopian in some way.

Another example is the text-book *49 Cities* published in 2010 [3], a vivid survey of utopian urbanism and a remarkable insight into our understanding of the metropolis developed by the New York-based Work AC studio: “Today, with the failure of the suburban experiment and the looming end-of-the world predictions – from global warming and waste to post-peak oil energy crises and uncontrolled world urbanization – architects and urbanists find themselves once more at a cross-road, fertile for visionary thinking. Today’s meeting of intensified environmental fears with the global break down of laissez-faire capitalism has produced a new kind of audience, one that is ready to suspend disbelief and engage in flights of the imagination to radically rethink the way we live.” [3, p. 4] In general, the mentioned publications are the most representative samples of present day urban utopian discourse, reflecting the questionable state of the (urban) world and proposing radical visions of our future.

Another resource for contemporary architectural development and innovation in the third millennium was the exhibition at London’s Barbican Centre in 2006 and its catalogue *Future City – Experiment and Utopia in Architecture 1956 – 2006* [4]. The exposition had demonstrated various vision of future cities and utopian architecture that have emerged in the past 50 years – from the visionary artistic projects of Constant Nieuwenhuys, to gigantic structures of Archigram and Superstudio, to Kisho Kurokawa’s *Floating City* (1961), Rem Koolhaas’s famous *Delirious New York* (1978), to deconstructivists Daniel Libeskind and Zaha Hadid as well as contemporary digitally inspired work by Nox and Decoi. With no doubt, this is the most comprehensive review of experimental and utopian architecture and urban planning over the last decades.

In 2010 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York presented the installation called *Rising Currents: Projects for New York’s Waterfront* which consisted of visionary urban and landscape solutions for a rapid rising sea levels resulting from the global climate change. The exhibition is composed of five site-specific projects proposing experimental solution to the waterfront of New York harbour. Barry Bergdoll, the Philip Johnson Chief Curator of Architecture and Design at MoMA explained the aim: “Your mission is to come up with images that are so compelling they can’t be forgotten and so realistic that they can’t be dismissed” [K. Cilento, *Rising Currents at MoMA*, <http://www.archdaily.com/53736/rising-currents-at-moma>, accessed 12.10.2016]. In this respect, it is clear that the exhibition demonstrates the ability of contemporary architects and urban planners to identify the problem (climate change) and to design the potential and down to earth solution by means of an utopian idea.

Research and exhibition project *Megastructure Reloaded* [<http://www.megastructure-reloaded.org/>] realized in 2008 is a part of the long-term project *Utopia Revisited* which includes workshops, symposia, publications and exhibitions throughout Europe from 2006 to 2011. The exposition tested the

relevance of megastructuralists conceptions such as Archigram's *Plug-in City*, Constant Nieuwenhuys' *New Babylon* and Yona Friedman's *La Ville spatiale* for the problems of contemporary urban design and mega-city – it puts these visionary plannings of the 1960s back up for the discussion and places them within the context of present-day urban conditions, conventional city-planning approaches as well as artistic perspectives.

Finally, at the institutional level, *The Why Factory* (T?F) is a global think tank and research institute (conducted by the famous architectonic studio MVRDV, Delft University of Technology in Netherlands and directed by professor Winy Maas) concentrating on the production of models and visualizations for future urban scenarios: “Education and research of The Why Factory are combined in a research lab and platform that aims to analyse, theorise and construct future cities. The Why Factory investigates within the given world and produces future scenarios beyond it; from universal to specific and global to local. It proposes, constructs and envisions hypothetical societies and cities; from science to fiction and vice versa. The Why Factory thus acts as a future world scenario making machinery.” [<http://thewhyfactory.com/about/the-why-factory/>] *Tomorrows Thoughts Today* [<http://www.tomorrowsthoughtstoday.com/>] is a London-based think tank aimed at the collective research mapping of the consequences of fantastic, speculative and imaginary urbanism. In general, the authors of these projects and initiatives are mostly from the prestigious architecture studios and academia.

In conclusion, mentioned activities are just a part of a wider discourse searching for possible scenarios of the future cities. We can identify three basic conditions of contemporary urban utopia. Firstly, as in the classic form of utopia the fundamental demand is to create a future vision, to propose a perfect solution that should fix the problems of civic society (naturally, present-day urban utopias utilize the ubiquitous development of technology in a profound way). Secondly, urban utopias share the common epistemological aim to imagine alternative worlds as a means to understand our own world differently, to help to explore the implications and consequences of emerging trends, social organizations, technologies and ecological conditions. Thirdly, the authors from various scientific disciplines and professional areas are actively confronted in this experimental field – in addition to architects and urban planners, there are specialists in Construction technology, Landscape urbanism, Visual art, Conceptual art, Computer science, Ecology, Bio-engineering, Sociology, Anthropology, Urban studies, fiction and Philosophy. Utopian discourse stimulates the interdisciplinary community of varied experts and mixture of approaches. Moreover, many of these utopias shifted from the notion of a perfect society to the happiness of an individual. Naturally, it relates to recent changes in the meaning of social community and the individual's role in society: “Compared with the past, today's communities are typical for a number of elements of heterogeneity; they not only experience changes, but they often even seek them. They are more diverse, adaptable and promote individual freedom and responsibility in the context of obligations to the group.” [5]

3. Urban utopia and Central Europe

In the previous section, we identified the contemporary urban utopian discourse mostly evolved in advanced countries; in the next section we are going to connect it with the specific urban and social conditions of the Central European region in a more speculative way. The second part of my article, in line with utopian thinking, is rather a thought experiment: “A thought experiment is a device with which one performs an intentional, structured process of intellectual deliberation in order to speculate, within a specifiable problem domain, about potential consequents (or antecedents) for a designated antecedent (or consequent)” [6]. So, what kind of urban utopia should be designed in the context of Central Europe? What are the civic or social conditions the urban utopia should stem from in Central Europe?

In general, we can claim that the Central European region is suffering from a lack of utopian thinking. It is significant that majority of the above-mentioned Initiatives originate from Western Europe, North America or Asia (here is frequency of national origin of projects in *Utopia Forever* – USA: 29, UK: 15, FR: 12, DE: 9, NL: 7, DK: 6, JP: 5, CN: 4, BE: 4, IT: 4, ES: 3, AU: 3, PL: 1, AM: 1). This simple calculation concisely reflects the absence of inventive and radical thoughts in the region of Central Europe in architectural and urban planning discussion – there is just one nation, Poland, representing the V4 region and it is symptomatic that this project's main theme is the searching for the lost identity of the post-socialist city. Based on the absence of publications, exhibitions, individual researchers or institutional framework that would design present-day utopian visions of Central European cities we can conclude that there is no serious discourse about it.

By now, the point is to examine why urban utopia is arising, or once again, to point out its epistemological commitment: “...utopias’ principal value is their illumination of alleged problems and solutions back in the ‘real world’ from which they sprang” [7]. In fact, most of the 109 projects in *Utopia Forever* responds in some way to the environmental, social and technological consequences of industrial and post-industrial urban development. These concepts are mentioned most frequently: self-sustainability, climate change, global warming, sea-level rise, renewable energy, water supply, carbon footprint, sprawl, consumerism, waste, social tension, distinction of man and nature. Ecological crisis, social tensions and inequalities of late capitalism, ICT development and concomitant circumstances constitute without a doubt the real world from which the current urban utopias stem – they are a litmus paper.

As a possible explanation of the absence of Central Europe in utopian discourse it can be stated that these countries (we are talking mainly about the V4 states – Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic) must solve some more elementary social and economic problems before they start fantasize about an urban future. Historically, after forty years of socialist order they have fallen behind Western Europe and nowadays they are trying to catch up with the past

times since 1989. Then, it is no surprise that the avid pursuing after the wealthy capitalist urban lifestyle has priority over the searching for an alternative future.

The post-socialist situation of the V4 countries has very specific features – grey cities stricken by the communist ideology and its remorseless urban interventions; society traumatized by a totalitarian regime and then jump-started by the turbo-capitalism with almost no rules and legal protection, full of corruption and ineffective management. Considering the Central European geopolitical perspective and its topography, there are not so many burdensome and firsthand obstacles which would bring about the utopian reflections upon natural disasters, energy crisis, urban sprawl, hyper-density, uncontrolled technological progress, hedonism, excessive consumption, depopulation, migration (until recently). Despite the global impact of these affairs, Central Europe has not suffered yet enough from them to be obliged to urgently debate on these topics.

4. Central European blindness

Naturally, ecological, social and urban crises are present in the Central European region. Nevertheless, the feature and scope of these threats are relatively different from the areas referred to by today's urban utopias. In general, it is clear that urban defects, environmental and social troubles of advanced countries have been caused by the rapid development of industrialization from the late 18th century to the post-industrial present times: "The global ecological crisis is a crisis of civilisation" [8]. The fictional and critical responses to these circumstances take the form of urban utopian discourse.

Irony of the Central European countries' fate is that after forty years of socialism, they are very diligently approaching to the urban, social, economic and technological state of the advanced western countries: "CEE-10 states have managed to grow at much faster rates than the core of the EU, increasing their GDP levels by 40-120% over the 1995-2008 period. Rapid economic growth has allowed these countries to substantially reduce per capita income gaps to the EU15 countries." [*CEED Report: Central and Eastern Europe Development – development, opportunities and challenges*, 2011, <http://ceedinstitute.org/report/1651>, accessed 12.10.2016]. In general, the basic argument of this article is as follows: by means of V4's jumping on the bandwagon of global economic progress the former differences between Western and Central Europe are blurring and, in this regard, V4 is contributing to the questionable conditions that have been the direct or indirect causes of the increased occurrence of urban utopias.

Central Europe has always been a little behind the wealthy western nations and they are approaching them in terms of economic growth, political culture and quality of life in general. However, metaphorically speaking, in such an effort they have forgotten to carefully monitor the longed-for destination. In brief, the V4 countries are still not at the level of the western countries and in the

process of their trying to become equal with them, western countries started, by means of utopian thinking and other critical activities, to reassess the basic direction and visions (see, for example, Palitefka's account on the future of western civilization [9]). This is V4's mistake as well as a great challenge.

5. Central European responsibility

Naturally, the issue is much more complex, multi-layered and full of exceptions. The Central European region, for example, has participated considerably in the environmental contamination already during the socialist era. The post-socialist city will certainly retain its urban and social peculiarities, positive and negative. On the other side, consequences of the capitalist mode of production are dispersed globally and the western urban living is still worth to be followed.

However, the basic logic is that considering the broader context and long-term horizons, V4 is belatedly heading into the state of affairs that are reflected in the present-day urban utopias. The Central European countries have to realize this simplified reasoning and to consider the possibility of precautionary measures: "The danger is that while still being the leader of growth and convergence with the EU15, the CEE-10 could be affected by spillover of other countries' troubles" [<http://ceedinstitute.org/report/1651>]. To continue in this direction would be disregarding for V4, as would be going back. Central Europe is somewhere midway and still has the chance to bypass the anticipated future – it would mitigate the expected consequences of V4's direction to the Western ideal which is called into question in recent years. The study of the urban utopias can indicate the road lines of these byways.

The main purpose of this article is to highlight the question of the Central European cities and societies, their present condition or expected future. Based on the presented observations, it attempts to substantiate the appeal to actively take advantage of the current urban utopias in order to forestall or moderate the disadvantageous conditions in advance. This suggestion seems trivial or superfluous. Anyway it is clear that Central Europe is still short of the sufficient subvention of ecological planning and balancing of the social and urban inequalities. This kind of indifference is not the cause, but the result of post-socialist situation. Utopian discourse is able to give the V4's countries a lecture in forward-looking and prudent direction. In terms of history, the post-socialist cities have particular motives to be far-sighted and to deal with the latest urban trends, realistic as well as utopian.

The V4 representatives should respond more flexibly and promptly to the latest architectural and urban planning, as well as to technological innovation. We are talking about the trends in current urban utopias, such as ultra-green architecture, sustainable density, urban diversity, solar and wind energy power stations, efficient and self-sufficient energy systems, urban agriculture, vertical gardens, bio-filters, bio-technology, ecomobility, collectiveness, low-energy consumption, cultural and creative cities. Even if the situation was not so

serious, it would make sense to discuss and adopt most of these devices in Central Europe as soon as possible, for there is nothing to wait for.

6. Conclusion

Naturally, it is not immediately achievable to find the Central European cities shoulder to shoulder with their dreamt-of western allies. It will be a success if the V4 countries at least managed to get rid of the traumatic legacy of their socialist regimes, because this historical disposition has been expressing itself for 25 years as an anxious pursuit of catching up to the advanced countries, as well as an inability of coping with the past, and as a symptomatic incapability of collective reflection on the alternative possibilities of V4's urban, social and environmental future.

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