The Rise and Fall of CIAM Urbanism

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Contents

Introduction 2
Pre-CIAM utopian schemes 3
CIAM utopian schemes 3
A Complete failure? 4
Venturian and postmodern critiques 5
Towards a new utopia: a heterotopian bricolage 6
Contemporary issues 6
Notes 8
Introduction

It has become one of the biggest taboos in the architectural discourse: CIAM urbanism. Everyone agrees on this point: CIAM urbanism completely failed. Pointing the finger to Le Corbusier and his disciples is easy afterwards – just lay the blame on them - concluding that the zoning laws as they were proclaimed in the Athens Charter of 1933, did not work. The large scale utopian schemes by Le Corbusier, Hilberseimer and others that meant the elimination of the closed perimeter block, providing large and open green fields for towers to stand in, resulted in public spaces of no-man’s land with feelings of anxiety.

One of the major schisms between modern and postmodern architecture is their different view on total design, and the latter’s quest for diversity. Many solutions have been offered by theorists and designers. But on what points do they differ from their predecessors, some of these solutions seem even more ridiculous than the ones they so eagerly criticize.

The schemes as they were provided by CIAM were only realized partially and on a small scale during the pre-war period. But after the Second World War, when European cities needed fast and large scale reconstructions, the CIAM ideals seemed well applicable. With the use of mass production, high-rise buildings in open space could be realized in a short period of time, providing light, air and green for their residents.

The means of CIAM’s Athens Chartes were very utopian, they provided ideologies that were applicable for the collective. This concept of utopia has been a topic of discussion for the last five decades, having the tendency of precluding utopia. But should we reconsider the utopia? Is there a contemporary utopian aim needed in a world of globalization and where the poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer?
Pre-CIAM utopian schemes

The concept of utopia traces back to the Renaissance, where Thomas More formulated the ideal society in his famous book *Utopia* of 1516. More’s utopia is largely based on Plato’s *Republic*, where egalitarianism and pacifism are the rule.² The first schemes of the ideal city were also developed in the *quattrocento*, by artists such as Filarete and Francesco di Giorgio Martini. These star-shaped or polygon diagrams for cities also were the first to apply to an overall planning: Filarete’s Sforzinda was described in great detail, from the prince’s palace and the cathedral to the quarters for the merchants and artisans, and the prisons.²

In 1804, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux published the design of the ideal city of Chaux. The proposal shows that Ledoux was ahead of his time, the plans were a forerunner of the garden city and a forerunner for the hygienic conditions for the workers.³ Although Chaux was conceived for an actual site, again it was an example of overall planning: from the house of the director and the residences of the workers to several buildings of original and unprecedented functions. Around the same time, other utopian schemes were presented, by the so-called utopian socialists. Charles Fourier’s *phalanstrère* is a large monumental building with wings for collective living – a transformation of the Baroque palace, like Versailles. Robert Owen’s New Lanark, a large rectangle set in land with three detached buildings in between: church, school and canteen.⁴ Although these schemes were developed for a smaller amount of people that later schemes would apply to, they provided small self-sufficient communities. The schemes all have a collectivist approach.

The utopian schemes mentioned above relate to pre-modern societies. It was in the nineteenth century, with the Industrial Revolution, that a shift from agricultural to urban societies emerged, changing society so drastically that a new class appeared - the proletariat. The slums, where the working class lived, were attacked on architectural and urbanistic grounds by men like Ebenezer Howard and Tony Garnier, respectively *The Garden City* and *Une Cité Industrielle*, again relying on collectivism. Soon the great masters of modern architecture became preoccupied with rehabilitation of the cities.

CIAM utopian schemes

In 1928 the *Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne* was founded in La Sarraz. From the start, CIAM was engaged in social and economic matters, with minimal requirements and measurements for housing and urbanism, designs that were not determined by aesthetic values, but merely by functional ones. In 1933 the most famous meeting was held, having *The Functional City* as topic, resulting in the Athens Charter.⁵ As preparation, 34 cities were analyzed, divided in five themes: dwelling, recreation, work, transport and historical parts.

The city is part of an economic, social and political whole and needs to create favourable living circumstances for either individuals and the community.

The following observations were made: The population density is too high, the buildings are in bad condition and far below the hygienic requirements, there is also an absence of sufficient green recreational areas. The housing next to roads has negative effects on its residents by the noise, dust and gasses it produces. For the enclosed perimeter blocks, half of the dwellings have an inadequate orientation to the sun. The distance between a large part of the city’s residents and their work is too big, resulting in travelling times from home to work up to an hour and a half. The roads, originally meant for horse and carriage, do not meet the needs of contemporary traffic – vehicles, trams etc.

As answer to these problems CIAM proclaims the development of housing in that part of the city that is favourable in terms of topography, green areas, sun and climatic circumstances. Green areas – parks, sport fields, playgrounds - should be at close distance to all residences. Small public buildings, like schools and community centres, are allowed on these green areas. The distance between living and work should be as short as possible, industry and dwelling should be divided by neutral – green – zones. To make
the traffic more safe, traffic and living should be separate, divided by green areas. Roads should be differentiated by function and speed, with crossings on different levels. One solution is the most remarkable but familiar of all: ‘respecting the fact that modern techniques of concentrated high-rise buildings on distance of each other, allows the realization of green areas (parks) in between’. The latter solution is the only that has a spatial character, it describes not what should be done, but how it should be done.

These schemes have been worked out by different architects, two of them are addressed here. There is the horizontal city, by Le Corbusier and the vertical city by Ludwig Hilberseimer, see pictures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Horizontal city by Le Corbusier
Figure 2: Vertical City by Hilberseimer

Le Corbusier’s provides the horizontal city as a solution for the industrial society. The city is made up by a centre, where people live and work, and the suburbs, were people live and work in factories. In the city centre, the 200 meter tall office skyscrapers rest on pilotis in the green area, occupying only 5 percent of the surface. Smaller buildings on receding terraces like restaurants, cafés and shops are also in the centre. The centre is surrounded by six-storey high residential blocks, zigzagging through the parks with ‘set-backs’, all on pilotis, leaving the ground open. ‘The depressing facades of the rue corridor have been replaced by geometrical shapes juxtaposed, or set far apart, or brought together in a monumental and lively urban landscape’.

Vehicle and pedestrian traffic is strictly separated, for the safety of both. Public transportation is underground, with a central station located in the city centre, and a metro system having stops at both the commercial and residential blocks. Between the city centre and the suburbs, a green belt will be laid out. The suburbs consist of a garden city with residential blocks of only three storeys high, with vegetable gardens, playgrounds and sport field in between, and an industrial zone.

In Hilberseimer’s proposals, the zoning happens vertically. Actually two cities are placed on each other. The five storeys below are the commercial city with car traffic, the fifteen stories above are the residences and pedestrian traffic. The 60 meter wide roads for vehicles that are separated from the pedestrians, should result in a safer traffic, with crossings on different levels. This is even more efficient than Le Corbusier’s, making it an example of Fordist architecture.

A complete failure?

From their socio-economic and historical perspective, these solutions seem very relevant and promising. But obviously history has taught us this is not the case, urban plans based on the CIAM principles became a failure. According to Het Ontwerp van de Stadsplattegrond by Heeling et al. there are two reasons for its failure. First, a problem is the surplus of public space that is not used as such, because a clear structure is absent and the authorities have insufficient means for maintenance. The public space was designed and realized in spirit that the neighbourhood would collectively identify themselves with these green spaces, but as the individualisation of society came about, this collective identification never happened. What should have been a space for
everyone, became ‘lost space’ – a lost space of which nobody cares, which is used as left-over space for parking cars, a space where people feel unsafe and disoriented.9

Secondly, a deficiency of possibilities for incidental alternations. In nineteenth century neighbourhoods slow transformations are possible, in CIAM urbanism – with its overall planning – everything is strict and cannot be altered, for changes would immediately change the overall concept.10

Did the CIAM urbanism fail on every point? The living conditions were improved. More light, air and green resulted in better hygienic circumstances. But these same improvements were also fulfilled by less drastic – less CIAM-like – solutions. Pre- and inter war social housing schemes by Ernst May, J.J.P. Oud and Mart Stam seem to have worked, but according to Castex et al.11, these were only a transformational phase of the enclosed perimeter block to the CIAM’s ultimate goal – high-rise towers in open fields.

In *Functionalism Today*, Theodor Adorno12 attacks functionalism by claiming that architecture has lost its autonomy. ‘I find that the style of German reconstruction fills me with a disturbing discontent, one of which many of you may certainly share’13 is how he puts it in the beginning of his essay. This claim, the consensus of discontent is very ironic, for the architects of CIAM had try to make a better world, to make a better society, for the collective – the working class. But in that turn, the collective disliked the urban surroundings and fulfilled them with feelings of anxiety. The blame was on the architects, the victims were the less happy of society – those which the former so eagerly wanted to help. The fall of autonomy and the rise of monotony seems to effect the collective the most. The surplus of public space had a contrary effect – individualizing instead of collectivizing their inherent collectivism seems to have failed.

**The Venturian and postmodern critiques**

One of the earliest postmodern critiques came from Robert Venturi. In *Learning from Las Vegas*,14 Venturi claims that architects can learn from popular and commercial architecture, instead of the heroic architecture of the modern disciples.

‘It is not the time for heroic communication through pure architecture... Each medium has its day... The iconography and mixed media of roadside commercial architecture will point the way, if we will look’.15 There is more in architecture than mere symbolism. Is this not Venturi being heroic - is this not Venturi being prophetic, messianistic or whatever term postmodernists ever claimed the modernists to be? Is it not Venturi here who sets out what architects ought to do – ‘if they will look’? In the Las Vegas Strip, architecture is diminished, or reduced, to a set of signs and symbols. Architecture does not attract the people’s eyes, the signs and symbols do – just as the architecture of Le Corbusier did not attract the people’s eye:

‘Sun, space, verdure: essential joys, through the four seasons stand the trees, friends of man. Great blocks of dwellings run through the town. What does it matter? They are behind the screen of trees. Nature is entered into the lease’.16

Venturi replaced the trees by signs and symbols. Signs and symbols have become ‘friends of man’.

Another ‘replacement’ can be detected in *Learning from Las Vegas*, although implicit. Hilberseimer’s Fordist vertical city, being efficient for living above your work, can here be translated to the buildings along the Strip - staying in a hotel above your casino is efficient - working is replaced by gambling.

In *Learning from Las Vegas*, the architect is artist no more. The architect becomes an utilitarian – in John Stuart Mill terms – for the sake of the greater good, just as the CIAM disciples did half a century earlier. People like The *Guild House* instead of *Crawford Manor*. It means the death of the architect as an artist. Death to the artist as the forerunner and revealer’.17 Death to Goethe’s famous romantic credo ‘the artist must create what the public ought to like, not what it does like’.18

Other solutions have been proposed by the Situationists, of whom Constant’s New Babylon is as unliveable as the Pruitt-Igoe housing, and an exaggeration of one of Le
Corbusier’s *Five Points* – a city on pilotis. As for Superstudio’s ideal society where ‘there will be no further need for roads and squares. Every point will be the same as any other’: 19 monotony guaranteed.

It seems that these solutions can not even be taken seriously. They tend to be better than the solutions of CIAM but again they make the same mistake – diversity is neglected. They are inflexible and *ideological*. Venturi becomes a messiah just like Le Corbusier and Hilberseimer – the message that solves all problems; New Babylon and Superstudio’s ideal society share the overall planning with the plans of CIAM. None of them offers a set of tools for different problems, there is one ideology that offers the solution to all problems. A pragmatic design approach would be the answer – an *ad hoc* design approach.

### Towards a new utopia: a heterotopian bricolage

Hitherto, the urban design of CIAM has been criticized on grounds of collectivism and ideology. CIAM urbanism was also very much criticized for its utopianism.

One of the most interesting postmodern critiques on CIAM’s total design is brought by Rowe and Koetter, in *Collage City* of 1978. The modern architects were successful in reconciling two seemingly antagonistic factors, science and humanity, and the city was the place for this collaboration. The architect, as key figure, must take the historical lead to make *tabula rasa*, in order of humanity. 19 However vivid this may sound, eventually one must recognise that ‘this ‘light’ only permits a restrictive and monocular vision. Therefore, from the bias of normal optics we must speak of utopia’s decline and fall’. 20

Rowe and Koetter go on saying that utopia’s existence is poetically necessary and politically deplorable, 21 proclaiming a collage approach, an approach in which objects are drawn from their context to deal with the problems of utopia. A collage as technique, a collage as a state of mind - the architect as bricoleur is here proposed. 22 Collage is a design strategy opposed to total design, which can allow utopia to be dealt with as image, to be dealt with in fragments without having to accept it in total. 23

Another critique on utopia came from the poststructuralist thinker Michel Foucault, claiming that utopias are ‘fundamentally unreal’. In his *Of Other Spaces*, 24 Foucault describes that the space of localization in the Middle Ages moved form a space of extension – caused by Galileo’s work – to a space of arrangement. We live ‘in a set of relationships that define positions that cannot be equated or in any way superimposed’.25 Foucault is primarily interested in spaces that are in relation with all the others, and yet contradict them. There are two types: the utopia and heterotopia. Utopias are arrangements which have no real space, they represent society itself brought to perfection, or its reverse. 26 There is also a place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable, a place of real and effective spaces which is probably true for all cultures and civilizations: the heterotopia. 27 Examples of the latter are heterotopias of crisis (military service and girl’s defloration on their honeymoon), heterotopias of deviation (prisons, old people’s homes- for the latter, in our hedonistic society, the inactivity of old age in a deviation), cemeteries, museums and libraries (for their accumulation of time), brothels, colonies and the ship (a placeless place). 28

Foucault’s recognition of these heterotopias, of these places being other, and the claim for the unrealness of utopia, also is a reaction to the overall planning of CIAM utopianism. The unrealness of one reality is replaced by the realness of multiple realities. Multiple realities exist and must exist simultaneously, for the sake of their existence. On this point Rowe and Foucault coincide. There cannot be an utopia, nor an ideal city or society, nor an overall planned city - but a collage city, in which multiple heterotopias exist. The postmodern urge for diversity can be realized in this city.

### Contemporary issues

How about the contemporary situations? Can a better society be achieved by architecture without the total design ideologies? Can there be more pragmatic design
strategies, as opposed to ideological ones? The contemporary situations seem to be ignored by the architects and urbanists. At least the CIAM had the exertion to change the world, the architectural discourse nowadays is only in the search for ‘newness’. Actually nothing new is produced, only copies of MVRDV, Koolhaas, Herzog & De Meuron are being produced. The architecture is image-based, there is no representation, no significance: meaningless architecture.29 Society changed from a production society to a consumption society and all what architects do is ‘go with the flow’. Postmodernism in architecture and urban design is shamelessly market-oriented, because that is the primary language of communication in our society, the planner’s zoning is replaced by a market-produced zoning.30 The search for newness rests completely on industry, the goal of architecture seems to be commerce. Rem Koolhaas even writes: ‘the only activity is shopping... It is our own fault – we didn’t think of anything better to do’.31

Reality is neglected: banlieus, slums, the less fortunate ones are evicted from the city centre to its outskirts, investments over investments in upcoming economies – the poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer.

Glossy architecture and advertisements are like utopias – they look like a place where everybody would like to live or work - but utopia is being laughed at. At least utopianism makes people aware of the imperfections of their society. Utopia should lose its ‘monocular’ vision. It is a fragmented utopia that is needed, the architect should become a bricoleur instead of a total designer. Only this would achieve what seems to be an ideal city: A utopia of diversity – a collage of heterotopias.

The contemporary situations call for reconsiderations. It is time to re-think Goethe’s credo. The time has come that one reconsiders Le Corbusier’s famous dictum ‘architecture or revolution’. Can revolution be avoided this time?
Notes

9. Ibid., p. 50-51
10. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 6
15. Ibid. p. 130-131
17. Ibid. p. 20, from a quote by Gabriel-Desiré Laverdant
18. Sigfried Giedion, p. 317
19. Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, p. 94-95
20. Ibid., p. 31
21. Ibid., p. 149
22. Ibid., p. 139
23. Ibid., p. 149
25. Ibid., 351
26. Ibid., 352
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 353-356
29. I am indebted here to Miguel Robles-Durán, for using the term ‘newness’ and its interpretation, from a lecture held on 28-02-2008 at the Faculty of Architecture at the Technical University of Delft