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Pensiero utopico e l'interculturale co-creazione di futuri urbani

Utopian thinking and the intercultural co-creation of urban futures

Così come le città affrontano le pressioni ambientali e sociali riferite al cambiamento del clima, così richiedono una rapida trasformazione. I sistemi ambientali e sociali globali sono tesi sotto la pressione degli stili di vita di una borghesia estremamente consumista, particolarmente in Nord-America. La continua crescita ed il consumo peggiorano la questione. Il pensiero utopistico ci permette di concentrarci sulla speranza, piuttosto che sul conflitto e sulla disperazione. Esso permette di considerare i cambiamenti fisici in forma localizzata ecologicamente che integra i sistemi urbani e di considerare i cambiamenti sociali nella forma di un'utopia eco-sociale partecipativa. Utilizzando un approccio funzionale siamo in grado di trasformare le sfide della differenza e della diversità in opportunità per enfatizzare l'inclusione, e il pluralismo culturale e religioso, nella co-creazione di visioni reciprocamente vantaggiose del futuro urbano.

As cities face environmental and social pressures related to climate change, they require rapid transformation. Global environmental and social systems are stretched under the strain of highly consumptive middle class lifestyles, particularly in North America. Continued growth and consumption make matters worse. Utopian thinking allows us to focus on hope, rather than conflict and despair. It allows us to consider physical changes in the form localized ecologically integrated urban systems and social changes in the form of a participatory eco-social utopia. Using a capabilities approach we can transform the challenges of difference and diversity into opportunities for emphasizing inclusion, and cultural and religious pluralism, in co-created, mutually beneficial visions of urban futures.

Parole chiave: **Pianificazione urbana; Utopia; Inclusione sociale; Pluralismo; Multiculturale; Comunità ecologica**

Keywords: **Urban planning; Utopia; Social inclusion; Pluralism; Multicultural; Ecological community**

This essay is about using utopian thinking in the service of envisioning an improved urban future. We face environmental calamities, in the form of climate change and ensuing ecological degradation, and face social calamities partly brought on by climate change and our fearful reaction to it. The antidote is visionary thinking that includes the thoughtful integration of diverse voices. I begin by discussing the merits and limits of utopian thinking to address seemingly intractable ecological and social challenges. I argue that eco-social utopian thinking should be applied to co-created intercultural visions of the future. I also present how a capabilities approach, whereby the unique perspectives and capacities of individual citizens are included, can empower citizens and enhance the processes of urban transformation.

In this essay I focus on the procedural democracy of co-creating urban environments so that they may be less consumptive and more egalitarian, acknowledging that a more complete tapestry of societal transformation should be examined for any utopian construct to adequately inform our long-term thinking. However, this is merely a starting point that will hopefully invite other strands of the tapestry to be more fully explored. I also focus primarily on urban and social conditions in North America with the hope that many of the arguments can be extended by others to similar conditions in other locations.

North American cities suffer an indolence of aspiration. They may function adequately but do little to add meaning or inspiration to society. Antiquated notions of pioneer homesteading have left many cities abysmally inefficient and bereft of character and culture; and produced an aesthetic of disposability and one-dimensional functionality. The prevailing dispersed low-density urban pattern is both ecologically dangerous and allegorically distressing. Many have rigorously and productively addressed the material extravagance and unsustainability of North American settlement patterns.[1,2] My critique comes from the intellectual and moral anxiety about the loss of hope that these cities exemplify. The antidote, I posit, is eco-social utopianism that cultivates hope through urban transformation that prioritizes resilience over idealism.

The merits of utopian thinking and the limitations of utopian communities

EUtopianism gives us hope. We lack stories of hope and the stories we do have are anemic in their consideration of the full spectrum of today's urban populations. Political utopian experiments, which were perhaps our most deliberate attempts at crafting a future beyond war, famine, servitude and psychosocial toxicity, failed in fulfilling their own ideals and in meeting their societies' needs.[3] Escapist utopia is not useful, as it quite simply cannot apply to a significant proportion of contemporary society. Experimental utopias of prescribed order, or freedom from state control but subservience to communal doctrine are similarly problematic.[4] Even town-sized experiments, such as Arcosanti and Auroville, both models of considerable achievement, have failed even if judged by their own criteria.[5,6] Moreover, they fail by a larger and perhaps more important criterion of not influencing the collective imagination of contemporary society. Yet they provide invaluable models that illustrate fundamentally improved ways of living and a radically improved quality of life for their members. As Critchley states, "to abandon the utopian impulse in thinking and acting is to imprison ourselves within the world as it is and to give up once and for all the prospect that another world is possible, however small, fleeting and compromised such a world might be."[7]

The utopian dream remains compelling in its audacity to imagine radically different systems of living that are ecologically synergistic. Ecologically speaking, radical social transformation is what is required to help us avoid tragic environmental and

climatic consequences.[8] Many communes and intentional communities may have indeed achieved some measure of radical transformation at a small scale but are not replicable at the scale of cities. The relative isolation and abundance of fertility, autonomy, and liberty that communes enjoy is available to very few. For our purposes here utopianism is not about constructing a paradisiacal retreat in lush isolation. What then can we harvest from this utopian dream? If, as Critchley suggests, twentieth-century utopianism is dead, then what would breathe life into twenty-first-century utopia? What attributes of utopian thinking are useful for scaling utopian experiments up to an urban scale?

Hope and aspiration are important in that they provide us with the imaginary space to consider radical transformations in our cities. Hope frees us from the constraints of pragmatism and elicits positive emotions such as delight, care, and compassion. But hope for what and in the service of what? If we consider that global climate change produces two converging crises – scarcity and conflict – then utopian thinking can imagine futures that would diminish the intensity of these twin threats.

Insofar as both climate science and economics have often left us with a vision of the world in which alternative futures are scarce or non-existent, history's role must be not only to survey the data about responsibility for climate change, but also to point out the alternative directions, the utopian byways, the alternative agricultures and patterns of consumption that have been developing all the while.[9]

Kraftl argues that the utopian construct has historically been broad enough to include "notions of abundance, healthiness, rurality, nostalgia, community, and social order(ing)".[10] But utopia is also about the dark and unsettled, as a counterpoint that helps define what is desirable, and a necessary condition of agitation, upheaval, and revolution that can unravel contemporary problems.[11] The utopian condition may also be unsettling if they require eliminating unsustainable material comforts, and may be unsettled if climate change renders all human settlement vulnerable to unpredictable natural hazards and therefore in a constant state of adaptation. Utopian thinking therefore requires consideration of the physical attributes of future cities.

The bio-physical challenge of utopia

The implicit promise of globalization and cultural hegemony assumes that more and more of the world will eventually attain the material comforts of the Global North.[12] But this promise cannot be fulfilled, and in fact, the reverse has to happen. The affluent Global North has to achieve levels of energy and material consumption that approximate those of the less affluent Global South.[13] This underscores our need for a radically different approach to thinking about our aspirations for the future.

The tabula rasa of utopian thinking allows us to be unconstrained by the current configuration of urban systems or infrastructure, and provides opportunities to refashion and reconstitute some of the basic features of urban environments. For example, reducing material and energy consumption may simply result from the localization of nutrient and water recycling. That means growing food, composting waste, and harvesting and purifying water locally. From Ian McHarg's *Design with Nature*, to the Farallones Institute's *Integral Urban House*, to Mollison and Holmgren's permaculture, to John Lyle's regenerative design we have numerous blueprints for integrating small-scale agriculture, aquaculture, and animal husbandry with the recycling of nutrients and water. They all include human habitation with a localized source of consumption, which has the dual advantage of making consumption conspicuous and enabling people to live with a much-reduced footprint.

However, these pioneering examples require more land areas than is available

in our populated cities. The bio-physical challenge is to transpose the theoretical and practical lessons of designing with nature, permaculture, and regenerative design to an urban metropolitan scale. For example, the Victory Gardens of WWI,[14] and 1990's Havana are testaments to responding to scarcity with innovation and adaptation. In Havana, any space or place with solar exposure became an opportunity to grow plants that provided food and enabled residents to endure the international embargo.[15] This transformation would be far more difficult in cities with greater densities and harsher climates. Can agriculture, nutrient and water recycling become systematically supported at different scales in all new design and construction? At what scale should localization occur? For example, to produce heat, hot water, and electricity; solar panels, micro-hydro,[16] and multi-directional wind turbines provide local power production at a building scale, but a biofuel power plant is only efficient at a neighborhood scale. Similarly, the processing of sewage that relies on compact marshes in the form of green houses to filter water is most efficient when it serves dozens of units.

A survey of global settlements reveals other ways that the human capacity to adapt can be instructive for our conception of a bio-physical utopia aligned with the ecological capacity of the earth. Informal settlements around the world demonstrate ingenuity, austerity, and adaptability. The per capita ecological footprints of low income countries are far closer to the earth's per capita ecological capacity than high income countries.[17] We have to be careful not to romanticize poverty or to mistake it for sustainability, because the kind of extreme poverty that often characterizes informal settlements is riddled with disease, death, violence, and hardship.[18] A pragmatic approach, however, would have us work in both directions: constructing an eco-social utopia by building up quality, stability, and comfort from a low-income baseline; and reducing consumptive behavior from a high-income base line.

The eco-social challenge of utopia

Utopianism that is in the service of addressing the dual goals of ecological health and cultural co-existence must reconceive society in a way that does not leave the majority of human and non-human life suffering the vagaries of rampant consumerism. We have to rethink the extreme hierarchies of social class that permeate urban settlements today. What manner of human relationships and biophysical relationships can uphold utopian ideals in the messy and often oppressive conditions of our cities? How can material and energy flows be reduced, refined, and made more efficient while simultaneously giving more people access to energy and materials? How can vast disparities in wealth, power, and privilege be reduced or harmonized. How can political and economic powers be persuaded to reduce their continued hegemonic dominance?

Dwelling on deeply troubling and intractable questions is more likely to fuel dystopian feelings than utopian problem solving. But, what if we imagined social changes in the service of social justice with the understanding that solutions cannot gain traction without thousands of experiments and iterations? Most utopian social constructs imagine a vastly reduced hierarchy with less material wealth and more sharing of that wealth. Michael Albert[19] presents an economic utopia of sorts, with a detailed plan of how our professional and labor classes can be reorganized with a more egalitarian distribution of resources and greater access to fulfilling jobs. Numerous fiscal and policy instruments characterize prosperity without growth and recast the basic distributive tenets of socialism for reduced consumption within the ecological capacity of the earth.[20] As painstakingly detailed as they are, these ideas remain on the fringes of mainstream discourse and continue to be politically unfeasible. They elicit an instinctive reflex of fear of

communist atheism, particularly in the United States.[21] Therefore, a transformative utopianism must contend with political, religious, ideological, cultural, and socio-economic diversity. This is a delicate dance, for with religiosity comes self-righteousness and exclusion. A deep kind of inclusivity that does not preclude religiosity, theism, agnosticism, or atheism requires Hibbard's ecumenical secularism,[22] whereby minority rights, irrespective of faith, are relentlessly defended against the potential tyranny or violent oppression of the majority.[23]

While there is some disagreement about the causal relationship between climate change, scarcity, migration, and war[24] there is some evidence that the recent violent conflicts in Syria and Iraq – causing one of the largest refugee crises in decades[25] – is the direct result of local climate change. The ensuing rise of xenophobic and violent religious fundamentalism on one side, and equally xenophobic nationalism and religious discrimination on the other, represent a fear-laden response to climate change. The war-centered violent defense of ideological self-supremacy undermines international treaties, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and any kind of peaceful co-existence. Here we must also recognize that for about 12% of the world's population living in extreme poverty, the source of the next meal is far more important to them than

any thought of maintaining the integrity of ecological systems.[26]

William James[27] challenges peace activists, and by extension utopians, to create an edifice to peace that is at least equal to war in its capacity to capture men's primal psyche. For utopia to become the moral equivalent of war, it must present a heroic vision of transforming the tendency towards plunder to compassion and love. According to Min-Sun Kim[28] even our inquiry into intercultural communication is laden with implicit objectives to dominate, devour and destroy the "other". A culture of peace requires upholding diversity and supporting difference, and should be mutually conceived, crafted, and owned.

Given that the majority of the world's population either has faith in a higher power or follows some religious worldview, then eschatology, or the study of end of time stories, is relevant to an intercultural discussion of the future. Eschatology often drives the values and actions of adherents regarding the possibility of a collective future, and thus has to be integral to the construction of such a future.[29] A study of the multiple narratives of the future, especially as interpreted by extreme adherents, reveals that they often are mutually exclusive.[30] Some interpretations explicitly imagine a future of confrontation and domination over other ideologies. Our cities, and our

framing of multicultural urban narratives, do little to challenge this. Because typical urban epistemologies are removed from a sense of place, many choose to cultivate cosmological and cultural identities based on ideology irrespective of who their neighbors might be and what relationships of reciprocity they could build with them. In the global competition for scarce resources, exclusionary claims to righteousness and truth justify battles for a larger share of finite resources. Instead, we need to be able to imagine a more positive and inclusive future.

Faith leaders can help adherents reconcile their ultimate values to bridge gaps of difference, and stimulate the imagination of a less polarized and more mutually respectful future. Planners must likewise ask themselves if cities can, through the deliberate interlacing of their ecological and social functions and the intercultural symbolism of their design, cultivate narratives of a genuinely pluralistic and ecologically balanced future. However, if a vision of a pluralistic inclusive city is to compete with the contemporary visions of the consumptive city, it cannot just be a vision created by urban planners, and has to be compelling enough to be sought, co-created and owned by multiple voices. In outlining some of the basic governance qualities of the *good city*, which he characterizes as a defense of utopian thinking, John Friedmann

writes:

Genuine material equality, Maoist-style, is neither achievable nor desirable. Whereas we will always have to live with material inequalities, what we must never tolerate is a contemptuous disregard for the qualities of social and political life, which is the sphere of freedom. A good city is a city that cares for its freedom, even as it makes adequate social provision for its weakest member."[31]

Of course, there has to be enough of a common ground to enable cohabitation with others and other species, but there must also be opportunity for individuated practice. The imagined cohesive future must include opportunity for different worldviews, ideologies, values, incentives, lifestyles and behavior. How can residents of a secular intentional community such as Skinner's fictional Walden Two,[32] for example, be given opportunity to read scriptures, meditate, or pray? At the urban scale, how can devotional needs of devotees of diverse religious practices be given as much priority as recreational needs? How can the unintended homogeneity of intentional communities, that Aguilar[33] describes, be made more inclusive of difference and diversity?

Some homogeneity of aspiration, or common ground, is essential of course. To realize his vision of a reinvigorated utopian thinking Friedmann states "[t]he protagonist of my visioning is an autonomous, self-organizing civil society, active in making claims, resisting and struggling on behalf of the good city within a framework of democratic institutions."[34] I suggest that the common ground of the good city, from which any future utopian project should not deviate, is the goal of significantly reducing levels of consumption and preserving ecosystem richness and balance. Every worldview must somehow reconcile its directives with the fundamental imperative of living within the ecological carrying capacity of the earth.[35] There is ample evidence that religious and faith groups have the capacity for this kind of alignment. A strategic approach towards the future would require us to find ways to cultivate co-created visions that are utopian in their hopefulness but pragmatic in their attention to the procedural challenges of working together across difference.

The Challenge of an Intercultural Co-Creation of the City

Utopian thinking applied to the process of creating visions of future cities brings us to forms of urban and community planning that directly engage the voices, ideas, intellects, and energies of citizens. Participatory planning processes have generally progressed from an emphasis on deliberative, negotiated, and dialogical processes with multiple stakeholders, to a more recent emphasis on highly technical and resource intensive approaches to engagement.[36] A recent trend in collaborative design workshops, often called charrettes, has helped increase interdisciplinary participation.[37] But it has not successfully engaged a diverse public, and tends to lead to predictable design outcomes that undermine the claim of participatory design.[38] In the social planning sector, innovative communicative processes that seek to empower low income populations tend not to have sufficient resources for turning their local efforts into larger municipal development goals.[39] In the area of social services, innovative approaches to promoting intercultural interaction are likewise underfunded and hampered by complex bureaucratic and policy constraints.[40]

Innovations in real estate development planning have tended towards well funded exploratory computational and visualization tools.[41] As cities grapple with the challenge of planning for climate change, they increasingly employ more technical tools and performance indicators in the service of achieving specific goals and targets.[42] Decision makers increasingly rely on these indicators to judge the merits of competing plans or visions.[43] Performance indicators illustrated through graphic and multi-

media visualizations make citizens feel less ambivalent, and more empowered in the face of complex problems like climate change.[44] Planning practitioners have also turned to visualization tools to help articulate more explicit links between neighborhood development and complex technical information.[45] Using a variety of digital 3D simulations can also help make spatial relationships more accessible to a diverse public with limited knowledge of urban design and planning.[46] In my own public engagement work I have found that using multiple pathways of engagement, including fun and entertainment, can lead to higher levels of understanding, participation, and long term changes in consumptive behaviour.[47]

A multi-pronged approach in which people have an opportunity to engage issues through whatever strengths, interests, media, ideas, or even ideologies they have, empowers them to take control, act, and ultimately contribute to collective change efforts. Our creative diversity is a rich resource and, rather than inadvertently constraining it through singular approaches to public engagement, we have an opportunity through the deployment of digital and social media to facilitate a myriad of approaches to expressing visions and harnessing the knowledge they bring. In practical terms, an appreciation of the priorities that different cultural groups might have for urban land-use underscores the importance of measuring variables of cultural amenity, diversity, social inclusion, and accessible social networks, all of which are poorly addressed in the new generation of digital tools.[48] Realizing an eco-social utopia requires integrating these avenues of accessibility to create an inclusive, adaptive, and relatively low cost approach to the co-creative engagement of diverse residents.

A capabilities approach to eco-social utopia

The capabilities approach introduced by Sen[49] and developed further by Nussbaum[50] is consistent with co-creative public engagement. The capabilities approach is an alternative to both development indices and human rights codes. Its advocates claim that rather than focusing on raising the total average GDP as a measure of development and progress we should focus on measuring the work and output that improves people's individual lives.[51] Nussbaum,[52] argues that liberalism stands opposed to all governance structures that perpetuate and normalize power hierarchies. The opposite must take place in fact and "all, just by being human, are of equal dignity and worth, no matter where they are situated in society... the primary source of this worth is a power of moral choice within them, a power that consists in the ability to plan a life in accordance with one's own evaluation of ends."[53] This has direct implications for public engagement in the planning of our future cities and the possibility for co-creating an intercultural vision.

Nussbaum's focus on the dignity of the body with all its senses, imaginations, thoughts, and emotions and her emphasis on the "ability to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life [including] protection of the liberty of conscience and religious observance,"[54] serve to add richness to our understanding of individual citizens who envision, inhabit, enliven, and co-create our cities. These are not treated as theoretical constructs but rather as basic rights for every citizen in the service of emancipatory and egalitarian justice. The realization of these rights is cumulative and not absolute. For example, the capabilities approach focuses on people's experienced improvements rather than theoretical ideals of justice that have little likelihood of being implemented.[55] For an intercultural co-created vision of urban futures that means building discernable *improvements* of access and inclusion within the context of the lives of diverse marginalized groups and also the capacities of those institutions that seek to include them. Neither the dismantling of oppressive institutions,[56] nor minimum

requirements of emancipatory justice,[57] are prerequisites for action. The capabilities approach allows us to incorporate opportunity and positivity in a pragmatic conceptualization of urban futures,[58] while avoiding the naïveté of status quo urbanism and its resultant trajectories.[59] A hopeful future alleviates marginalization through a set of inclusive urban policies and design characteristics,[60] and trans-disciplinary, multi-sectorial, and socio-economically diverse understandings of social support systems.[61] An intercultural vision should therefore be grounded in the lived realities and capabilities of residents, policy makers, and urban development planners engaged in the processes of city building.

The provision of an open and inclusive process does not end with plans, but rather by the enhanced capability of the intended user to use the results of those plans.[62] Utopian hope making notwithstanding, it is the concrete situation that matters, not the intention, nor the potential.[63] A dual level capabilities approach, after Hall,[64] allows a focus on individual and collective values, abilities, constraints, and opportunities for diverse members of society, as well as individual and collective values, abilities, constraints, and opportunities for those who plan and design for them. A truly intercultural co-creative process sheds light on the myriad consumptive profiles that make up cosmopolitan cities and informs the project of transformation for the sake of vastly reduced ecological footprints.

An eco-social intercultural vision also upholds a powerful and inspiring construct of a compelling future for cities that simultaneously reduce their ecological burden and increase their intercultural inclusivity. What is needed is utopian thinking that is grounded in grassroots community and service delivery work, and procedurally driven by the lived experiences of diverse participants and embraced by the inhabitants of the city. Our minds, constrained by today's realities, must not balk at imaginings of a future that seems naïve. We must ask ourselves, what is the story that we want for our society and our cities? What kind of relationships do we want for our progeny, with our human and non-human, and animal and mineral, cohabitants of the planet? Is it a post-strife world; is it a fortressed from strife world; or is it a world that proactively worked to reduce the possibility and intensity of strife?

Utopian thinking opens a window for imagining transformation and constructing some of its critical components. I presented complex, interconnected, and seemingly intractable ecological and social challenges that cities are facing and showed how we have to become radically less consumptive in order to live within the ecological limits of our planet. I argued that eco-social utopian thinking has to not only conceive of specific relationships between urban ecological and social systems, but also has to directly acknowledge and facilitate cultural, ideological, and socio-economic diversity. To help foster restorative peaceful futures an intercultural vision of the future has to empower a diverse citizenry. I presented the capabilities approach as a mechanism by which the contributions of individual citizens are treated as a basic inalienable right of residence in a community. Given the deep challenges that cities face, I call for employing the aspirational and transformational elements of utopian thinking to empower individuals and communities in the processes of crafting and implementing transformational visions of hopeful urban futures.

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