The Texture of Utopia

Neil Maycroft
History of Art
Material Culture
Lincoln School of Art
Design
University of Lincoln
e-mail: nmaycroft@lincoln.ac.uk

1

Abstract

To a large extent the history of Utopia has been intimately bound up with the city. Representations of Utopian futures have often been rendered as visions of ideal urban living. Moreover, a technologically driven cornucopia of material abundance has become a recurrent feature such that it is almost shorthand itself for Utopia. This paper will engage with the material culture of such Utopian representations - the buildings, the practical hardware of everyday life, the status of manual and mental labour, etc. It is the contention of this paper that most of these Utopian futures can be interpreted as representing the triumph of alienation and, hence, as anti-Utopian. The human body is 'disappropriated', abandoned to the sensory un-engaging qualities of Utopian material culture. An alternative approach to conceptualising the material stuff of Utopia will be advanced, one in which the full re-appropriation of the body is given a more central role.

Preliminary comments and observations

After recently visiting the Eden Project in Cornwall I was reminded by the domes of the futurist vision of life that abounded in the 1960s and 1970s. I recall that programmes such as *Tomorrow's World* promised that by the turn of the Millennium we would all be living in plastic domes, wearing one-piece shiny suits, eating food pills and jetting about using personal helicopters. Our cities would be crime and poverty free public spaces of monumental architecture and good manners. Domestic interiors would be sterile tidy places of calm, all material needs being met by fantastic technology which depended for their magic on hidden 'microchips'.

This Utopian vision has a much longer history and it seems that Utopian thinkers from all points on the political spectrum have used such visions of transformed urban life. What particularly intrigues me is that some Marxists, socialists and other left sympathisers have also deployed this vision, usually against the strong dis-urban tradition found in socialist thought. It seems to me that, on the one hand, this view of the Utopian city is antithetical to socialist aims. After all, is not the city the place with the most condensed manifestation of social pathologies? Is the city not the progenitor of alienation and anomie? Do these not flow from the physical organisation of the city itself or, at least, from the forcing of pre-capitalist social relations

2

into the city material. On the other hand, perhaps the Utopian city is to be seen as a challenge to this view, as an affirmation or wish that the power of socialism can overcome these manifestations of alienation? Or, perhaps it represents a sophisticated understanding that there is no direct causal relationship between physical form and social relations.

Of course, many Utopian cities turn out to be Dystopias or anti-Utopias. Their unravelling often comes from political repression, the consciousness of psychological control or, the discovery of an alternative outside of the city. In many cases there is a subtle hint that such anti-Utopian pathologies are a consequence of city life itself.

Indeed, the countryside as 'authentic' alternative to the alienation of city life features strongly in many accounts of Utopia. In these, the city Utopia often crumbles as a result of its inevitably doomed attempt to prevent some primal yearning of its inhabitants for reconciliation with pristine nature. I read this as both philosophically indefensible and practically naive. It represents an infantile desire for reconciliation and such a joining can never be unmediated. A humanly produced second nature will always intervene. Hence, the material culture of the Utopian city becomes significant.

This paper does not reject the city or the possibilities of its Utopian transformation. Dis-urbanism is both Utopian and anti-Utopian. Utopian in terms of the stupendous effort it would take for humans to turn their backs on cities or dismantle them, anti-Utopian in its rejection of the possibilities inherent in the density of city living.

Technological determinism and the ideal city

Utopianism has often been associated strongly with the notion of the ideal city. The ideal city has itself been regarded in Utopian thought as a plan for the transformation of society as a whole, a materialisation of Utopian ideals. The period from 1880 to 1940, in which a distinctive modernity and modernism were consolidated, was a particularly fertile one in its production of visions of ideal, Utopian cities (Hall 1984).

Fishman (1984) has identified in many such plans and proposals the materialisation of a crude Comtean positivism: If reform can produce the correct city form, then social harmony will inevitably follow as people recognise the rationality of such an arrangement.

Mumford (1966) observed that the ideal city has been historically visualised, beginning with the Ancient Greeks, as a machine. This has led to an impoverished idea of Utopia as rationalised urbanism. It is a vision which Mumford claims has been increasingly materialised as it has been idealised.

Indeed, underlaying many urban Utopias is a belief in the ability of technology to provide the fantastic physical structures that form the Utopian environment. Furthermore, there is a strong current of technological determinism apparent in these accounts. Not only is the ability of technology to deliver the material goods presented as self-evident but, there is a largely unquestioning acceptance that technological systems will autonomously determine the physical form of the ideal city itself. This has been a predominant theme in the development of modern visions of urban Utopias (Segal 1985).

Modernity is certainly replete with such cultural images of Utopia that are highly technologically determinist. For example, Fritz Lang's 1926 film *Metropolis* and H.G. Wells' novel *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) both featured technological futures though the political content of their visions was different (Bletter 1993). Responding to the rise of fascism, Lang painted the Dystopian picture of a hyper-industrial slave society, whilst, responding to the same developments, Wells produced a progressive Utopia of plenty and democracy. Indeed, Langs' vision of a master-slave Dystopia had been prefigured in Wells' own *The Time Machine* (1895) which featured a similarly Dystopian future but, one in which technology itself had become regressive. There are numerous other images of the city in science fiction that show technology either as liberation or as enslavement. One common image is of a technologically based city-like structure of abundance which is seemingly free but, which wages a constant battle with a non-urban realm in which real freedom and happiness reside. Arthur C. Clarke's *The City and the Stars* is a good example. It is a generic image that many socialists have adopted, consciously or otherwise, in which the urban is totalitarian and the rural free. Such Dystopian or anti-Utopian urban futures in which social relations are subject to almost total technological mediation and in which life for the majority of formally free but rationally manipulated citizens is programmed by a privileged elite, who alone have free access to the times and spaces of the city is commonplace.

Many of the factual Utopian urban plans and speculations of the early twentieth century were also distinctive in their optimistic belief in progress and technology. The key elements of this technocratic futurism were a belief

in the coming universality of the car and of a corresponding urban structure which was seen as little more than a linear corridor appropriate to the car's functioning. This linear road system determined the spatial configuration of both many modernist urban Utopias and increasingly of many cities themselves. This image of the city was enthusiastically promoted as a vision of capitalist Utopia whose realisation was made to appear inevitable. Such Utopian imagery was forcefully promoted within everyday life through the coupling of technological futurism with commercial interest. For example, in America, big car producers would sponsor various exhibits at World's Fairs and other popular exhibitions (Gartman 1994). Indeed, the 1939 New York World's Fairs theme was 'The World of Tomorrow' and it featured various future possibilities of urban living. Most visited was the General Motors sponsored 'Futurama' which featured a model city of Le Corbusian style skyscrapers arranged around the intersection of two gigantic superhighways. Another pavilion featured an alternative but complimentary urban Utopia titled 'Democracity'. This was an amalgam of plans drawn from both Frank Lloyd Wright's and Ebenezer Howard's Utopian visions. Again, the city space was sliced up in order for the motor-car to connect the home to work and to the burgeoning sites of consumption of a rising commodity culture (Wilson 1992). At the 1964 New York World's fair the 'Futurama' city of tomorrow was entirely conceived by car designers (Bletter 1993). The result was an urban future entirely shaped by the motor-car and in which public, civic spaces, some domestic spaces, and the spaces of transportation superhighways had all been merged into one.

We see this technological determinist theme continued in the fantastic Utopian visions of the city that proliferated as part of the counter-culture of the 1960s (Conrads 1970, Hall 1984, Bletter 1993). Such visions were replete with what seem to be impossible varieties of the urban including floating cities in the sky, gigantic megastructures (Banham 1976), the 'Walking City', the 'Plug-in City', underwater cities, and so on (Bletter ibid). Even Constant's 'New Babylon' project depended on undescribed and assumed technology as the basis for its malleable character.

Unsurprisingly, the American Disney corporation has been at the forefront of producing popular images of both the technologically determined urban and disurban future. For example, Disneyland which opened in 1956 was replete with 'illusoneered' pavilions and exhibits including 'Tomorrowland' that tapped into the popular imagination of high-tech futurism with

spaceships, monorails and superhighways (Wilson 1992). However, through the 1960s, 70s and 80s the Disney corporation gradually consolidated a vision of the future in which the city had been erased. The future that Disney promotes in its stead features a hybrid of past and present urban and rural characteristics that have been telescoped as models of industrial hyperdevelopment. Technology will guarantee material abundance and preserve nature clean and in tact. It is a vision that Bletter (1993) characterises as 'regressive futurism' and 'utopic degeneration'. However, it was not only commercial interests and popular culture that promoted fantastic technology as the motor of urban development, the Disney corporation and the big automobile manufacturers were not alone in this respect. More philanthropically-minded urbanists such as Buckminster Fuller also promoted fantastic technological urban futures. His plan to build a massive geodesic dome covering the whole of Manhattan is one such scheme (Bletter 1993).

The image of a urban Utopia based on the development of communications technologies has also been a recurrent theme in Utopian thought. The seemingly almost magical realm of communications appears as a new frontier in which hopes for a a transformed urbanity may be materialised or de-materialised (Wilson 1992). As such, the dream of a high-tech, virtual city of the future represents the latest development of a tradition of technologically determined urban Utopias (Robins 1993, Graham & Marvin 1996). However, where the modernist version built an image of a centralised, technologically dense and materially hard city, the new dream is of 'soft' technologies and 'soft' infrastructures that promote and allow the development of a decentralised and humanly scaled urban future (Segal 1985). Furthermore, it is generally assumed or stated that new information and communications technologies will facilitate the development of new forms of community, democracy and citizenship.

Enthusiastic advocates of the Utopian imagery of virtual cities stress the advantages that would accrue from the dissolution of the city that such technologies could facilitate. There is a persistent imagery anticipating the emergence of decentralised networks of small-scale communities, electronic cottages and the like. A plethora of new urban designations has developed as part of this imagery. These include: the invisible city, the informational city, the wired city, the telecity, the virtual city, the intelligent city, electronic communities, communities without boundaries, the virtual community, the non-place urban realm, 'Teletopia', 'Cyberville' and the 'City of Bits' (taken

partially from Graham & Marvin 1996). Many of these designations signify both the dissolution of urban centrality, and the de-materialisation of the built environment of the city itself. No detail is provided about the actual mobilisation of resources required to bring about such urban reorganisation. There is simply a technologically determinist assumption that such changes will proceed in an inevitable fashion.

In terms of the envisioned de-materialisation of the city, we see that this vision depends on the image of fantastic and mysterious technology that again resides in the subterranean ducts and channels of the city invisibly driving patterns of urban change. Of course, whilst such technologies may be largely invisible, they are certainly not immaterial. Indeed, the Utopian image of an immaterial society is heavily dependent on the the development of ever-growing amounts of increasingly sophisticated and visible hardware needed to generate the virtual realm (Moles 1995). It is also salient to point out that flows of information cannot substitute for flows of water, waste, electricity, gas, oil, food, raw materials or finished products in and between cities. On this point we may ask, 'where is the dirt'. Do these acme of efficient production represent the Western/Cartesian fear of the body, dirt and profligacy?

Robins (1993) has emphasised the rational and abstract nature of virtual space by adapting Sennet's (1990) critique of the grid system that developed in many American cities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Sennet such grids deny difference and particularity via their homogenising of urban space. Centrality is sacrificed to the bland notions of node and intersection which capture little of the historical significance of the city. These grids extend in three dimensions via street layouts and the vertical grids of skyscrapers. Robins extends this analysis through considering the global electronic spaces of flows as a further consolidation of this grid system which works to further the denial of difference and particularity. Consequently, a new metaphor arises to replace the modernist view of the city as a mechanical device. The new metaphor is that of the city as microchip or cybernetic machine which is equally as ordered and predictable but more disorienting in terms of the dizzying speed of its operation and its supposed immaterial form.

Urban Utopias, labour and the commodity form

There is a further significant element that many of these disparate visions of a technologically determined Utopian urban future share and it concerns the nature of labour in the future city. Whilst there is a shared belief in the power of technology to diminish the levels of necessary labour, whether or not labour is seen to have been actually abolished is often not clearly answered. In the slave society depicted by Lang it clearly has not been whilst in Constant's vision it perhaps has being replaced by play.

Indeed, the relationship between labour (heteronomously directed purposive action), work (autonomously directed purposive action), leisure (heteronomously directed non-purposive action) and play (autonomously directed non-purposive action) often seems unclear. A good deal of labour often predominates (Zamyatin's *We*) often in marked contrast to play (Wells' *The Time Machine*). In Wells' story especially we can detect a fear of the consequences that may befall lazy, feckless human beings should they abandon the world of directed labour. The seemingly innocent play of the Eloi is paid for by the parasitism of the labouring subterranean Morlocks. We find a similar fear expressed in Clifford Simak's novel *City* which contains a vision of a city based on total automation and mechanisation in which lack of work has driven humans to disinterested apathy so allowing dogs to rule. The work habit (labour) had so deformed humans that without it life is presented as meaningless.

The relationship between labour and play in Utopian representations deserves further consideration but, here I want to draw attention to one point; very many representations of Utopia seem to omit depictions of work. Defined here as 'autonomously directed purposive action' the actions most associated with work -making, building, craftwork, cooking, gardening, etc- are often conspicuous by their absence. What we often observe is the preponderence of what Ivan Illich has called 'non-convivial tools'. Illich uses the term 'disvalue' to capture the sense in which over-reliance on these non-convivial tools leads to de-skilling and the loss of autonomous control in daily life. Though such tools tend to rob people of quite narrowly defined abilities or skills, what Illich shows is that the loss is much greater than this. The loss of skills is also the loss of the self-determined inter-connective 'moments' of people's everyday lives. Apart from the general disvaluing of the fabric of everyday life, Illich also describes how particular skills are lost absolutely

which further impoverishes people's lives. Highly specialised and particular skills tend to be replaced by a narrow range of mechanised, mass produced and rationalised skills. The result is that an absolute loss of skills occurs and with it an associated loss of alternative values.

Convivial tools are Illich's antidote to this malaise. A mode of vernacular living is also central to his account of how a more fulfilling relationship may be developed between people and the artefactual material environment they fashion. Against those who regard conviviality as some kind of return to pre-modern or craft based production, Illich argues that convivial tools are not synonymous with low technological content. Indeed, conviviality is largely independent of technological content. The crucial point is that convivial tools allow for the autonomous production of use-values. Many depictions of Utopian life feature people who seem not to engage in the autonomous production of use-values at all. Rather, they appear as the passive recipients of use-values handed to them, the result of either fantastic technology or bureaucratically directed production.

What is also shared in many of these Utopian urban images is, however, an invisibility of the signs of labour as an external or surface feature of the city. More often than not, labour, production and maintenance take place in a hidden, subterranean realm. Massive underground engines of production, whether humanly tended or fully automated, provide the material abundance that is conspicuous on the surface. The surface signs of this productive activity -sound, dirt, by-products, etc- and many other features of everyday life, are usually absent. It is an image that has become reality at places like Disneyland in which miles of 'utilidors' allow the discrete passage of all productive functions to take place out of sight and mind of those who visit a theme park that seems magically devoted to pure fun. This results in an intensification of an image of the city in which the traces of its own means of production are dissimulated.

Wilson (1992) points out the affinity between this Utopian view of the city and the commodity form in which the reality of the productive forces are also hidden. It is as though this image of the city is the commodity writ large. Just as the commodity is presented as something to be consumed and enjoyed with no signs of the conditions of its production visible, so, the Utopian city is presented as a place for pure and guiltless enjoyment.

The material form of Utopia

In many discussions of representations of the Utopian city the focus has been largely on architectural form rather than on architectural practice. However, to concentrate on the celebration of the significance of architectural styles without considering wider social dynamics is to misunderstand how the form of the material culture of the city is produced and the effects it has on the everyday lives of people in the urban environment. In short, it is to fetishise the materiality of the city at the expense of analysing less tangible social relations. Indeed, attempting to define a social formation by characterising its forms of material culture alone is an anti-social exercise.

The rationality behind the design, production and manipulation of many Utopian city spaces is thoroughly rooted in the abstract space of capitalism. Consider, for example, the image of the city as a cultural playground. This seems to be built upon the values and sensibilities of only the affluent middle classes. The emphases on art, culture, identity, lifestyle, and consumption appeal to educated and discriminating middle class consumers of Utopian imagery. In terms of the city itself, the cultural is increasingly made synonymous with the urban whilst alternative uses of city space are denied. Strategies of cultural differentiation become the appropriate methods adopted in trying to differentiate the city as a centre of cultural sophistication against a seemingly homogeneous 'somewhere else' of the economically dispossessed and marginalised. Utopian cities dreamt by the poor and marginalised are likely to look very different to those proposed by privileged and affluent academics, architects and visionaries.

We can also spot in many of these representations the gendered bias characteristic of contemporary architectural and planning practice. The monumentality and 'phallic verticality' of skyscrapers is often pronounced as is the visual emphasis of the role of public space rather than private or domestic space. Again, the Utopian cities dreamt by women are likely to look very different from those associated with the male imagination.

Ironically, many of these semiotically-driven accounts of the Utopian city end up fetishising the signs of the city, signs of its material culture and representations of city life, at the expense of investigating the actually lived experience of the city. However, urban spaces are over-inscribed with signs and signals and are, therefore, susceptible to many differing and opposing readings. The semiology of space is practically irrelevant compared to the

way in which space commands, prescribes and proscribes bodies, gestures and mobility especially in everyday urban life. These approaches miss the point that, semiologically speaking, there are restrictive semantic fields that contain meaning and reign it in around the materiality of the social world. The urban text is not open to infinite readings and interpretations but, is grounded between, on the one hand, the instrumentally engineered and designed material forms of the spatial practice of architects, planners, builders and designers, and, on the other hand, the material forms of everyday spatial practice which are often inimitable to this instrumentality. Hence, the different dreams of women, the marginalised, poor, and ghettoised.

The French anthropologist Marc Augé (1995) offers some interesting insights here. He has argued that the type of spaces, characteristic of many urban plans, should be conceptualised as 'Non-Places'. This is because, while such spaces are replete with historical references, they actually represent a rupturing of the sense of historical continuity that allows temporal orientation and the production of an authentic sense of place. 'Non-Places' do not integrate earlier places. Instead, they aestheticise past places as commodified places of memory which are assigned a specific and circumscribed position or, they eschew traces of previous places altogether. This is common to many Utopian visions.

The actual landmarks, buildings, and memorials that embody the historical context of a particular space increasingly become obscured by the aestheticised representations of such temporal markers. Towns and villages have increasingly come to be represented by signs of their history as, simultaneously, they have become increasingly isolated due to high-speed rail links, motorways and by-passes that remove the necessity to actually visit them in order to grasp and understand their history. Hence, engagement with these 'Non-Places' is heavily mediated by such texts about places. The result is the annihilation of historical context as the nuances of historical difference become homogenised and presented as historically undifferentiated information. Furthermore, anticipation of the future, that in modernity was seen to be produced through the juxtaposition of past and contemporary, forward-looking architectural styles, is eroded as increasingly only uniform features of cities are regarded as being significant enough to be represented. The flattening of historical depth is often a conspicuous element in representations of Utopia with their uniform, gleaming and perpetually new architecture.

The second form of 'Non-Place' that Augé identifies is that in which traces

of former times and places are conspicuous by their absence. There is no contrast between the old and the new or between past and present. Anonymous airports, stations, motorways, and the like, present themselves as temporally sanitised spaces in which an eternal present reigns. The space bounded within these 'Non-Places' is measured in units of time. 'Itineraries, timetables, lists of departure and arrival times all telescope past and future into the urgency of the present moment' (Augé ibid: 104). This contrasts with representations of such spaces in which anticipation of departure, journey and arrival are much more strongly pronounced (Shivelbusch 1978). Engagement with this form of 'Non-Place' is also mediated via texts, texts that establish a contractual relationship with those who pass through. Injunctions and directives governing one's movement and actions abound. Indeed, access to such 'Non-Places' is dependent upon acquiescence to this contractual arrangement. Tickets, identity cards and passports are the necessary prerequisites that allow entry to such spaces. The insistence on proving one's identity contradicts the anonymity that such spaces create. The moving walkways, personal jet-packs and computer-controlled transport systems that feature in many images of the Utopian city can be viewed in this way.

Against this view we can introduce the thought of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre. A committed Utopian thinker and activist, urban life, for Lefebvre, represented a form of simultaneity, convergence, encounter, and difference that constantly calls for the exercise of the city as use value against the increasing dominance of exchange value. Such urban living is to be defended as increasingly dense and intensifying simultaneity increases the capacity for encounter, adventure and assembly.

The 'right to the city' expresses Lefebvre's vision of the urban as *oeuvre*, in a complex relationship of simultaneity, centrality, presence and absence that restores use-value to urban social life. The city is to be viewed as the place where a myriad of social needs can be fully developed and fulfilled. These include the need for certainty and adventure, community and isolation, encounter and solitude, similarity and difference, stability and unpredictability, creative play, sexuality, sport, art and so on. The city has the potential to provide sites of real human exchange and encounter. However, the historic city-centre, and the classical humanism that was its foundation and expression, are gone and cannot be reconstituted in its original form. It is an idealist and nostalgic dream to call for such reconstitution. Hence, the right to the city is neither a call for a pastiching of historic urban forms nor a de-

mand to have the right to merely visit the city in a passive manner. Rather, Lefebvre argues that new active forms of urban sociality can be imagined and produced and that a new humanism appropriate for 'urban society' can be forged.

The right to the city also legitimises the refusal to be either segregated into discrete residential areas, or of being removed from the city altogether. In Lefebvre's words it is 'the right not to be thrown out of society and civilisation into some space which has been produced solely for the purpose of discrimination' (1976: 35).

Lefebvre's other demand, the 'right to difference' refers to the right to resist being classified within the pre-established categories defined by the homogenising forces of capitalist social relations. It includes the defence and extension of liberal rights and liberties and leads to the demand for a 'space of difference'.

This dialectical Utopianism does start to point to a view of possible Utopian cities in which the disparate experiences of those who live in the city may begin to be reconciled within a democratically formulated material environment. David Harvey's opinion that 'Emancipatory politics calls for a living Utopianism of process as opposed to the dead Utopianism of spatialised urban form' (1996: 436) also points to this alternate conceptualisation.

The practical hardware of everyday life

Whilst it appears a straightforward proposition to equate everyday life with material objects it actually remains a relatively under theorised area. Ideas concerning the 'objectness' of everyday life and the 'everydayness' of objects have found particularly little resonance in English speaking accounts. This is true of many disciplines and of Marxism in particular. It is ironic given the central role that Marxism assigns to the commodity form that it should actually profess little interest in the physical qualities of objects themselves beyond asserting the contradiction between their use and exchange values. Rather, commodities are often represented, in Marxian accounts, as a simple means of linking the processes of production and consumption.

We can take an historical example in order to illustrate the many complexities of 'simple' objects. From the 1920s and 1930s onwards the proliferation of mass produced relatively affordable, standard goods was accompanied by

a new commodity aesthetics -'form follows function'- an emblematic motif of modern design. Such functional design was itself the correlate of standardised, mass production based on long-run, interchangeable components and planned obsolescence. Capital was developing a new form of aesthetics through which concepts such as speed, efficiency, progress and functionalism could be represented. Such industrial or Fordist aesthetics were part of a mode of cultural regulation according to Lee (1993) which aimed to ease the transition to modernity. For example, Streamform, a characteristic cigar or tear-drop shape, had originally been developed in aviation technology to counteract wind resistance. However, from the 1930s onwards Streamforming could be found on myriad products both within the transport field and outside of it. Suddenly all manner of commodities that never experienced drag were covered with symbolic aerodynamic pretensions. What Streamform was able to do was to bring the supposed characteristics of the capitalist mode of production -speed, progress, efficiency, rationality- and attach them to the commodity form (Lichtenstein & Engler no date). According to Ewen (1976), Streamform provided a symbolic solution to the problem of how the ideals of capitalist modernity could cut through the traditional cultural values and insinuate themselves in everyday consciousness with the least popular resistance.

The temporal aura of such commodities was explicitly forward looking. The use of materials, colour, and shape all anticipated a future in which even greater material abundance would be forthcoming. The incorporation of sophisticated technological symbolism into everyday objects carried particularly optimistic meanings. For example, images of atomic structures, rockets, and molecular crystalline structures, all proliferated in the 1950s and 1960s on fabrics, wallpapers, and the most mundane of consumer commodities. Such imagery reflected the faith placed in what were widely regarded as the cutting edge sciences of the day. Without overstating the extent to which the values of capitalist modernity erased more traditional values, the commodification of everyday life through the provision of a proliferating mass of such commodities did help, along with many other ideological and promotional techniques, to produce a forward-looking and anticipatory temporal aura in everyday life: The short term anticipation of new commodities and, the longer term anticipation of a technologically driven superabundant future. It is therefore understandable that much of the hardware of everyday life that we find in representations of the Utopian city should reflect this

technologically-driven vision of superabundance and mass personal owner-ship.

On the other hand, many accounts of Utopia produce a vision that is sanitised of the marks of everyday life. It is a manifestation of how everyday life is presented as something banal rather than interesting or significant. Following Lefebvre we can proclaim everyday life as just such a significant realm in which the potential for the autonomous exercise of use-value, of times, spaces, and objects, is possible and central. In their enthusiastic ex-punging of the significance of everyday life and use-value from their imagery, many accounts reproduce an intensification of the erosion of a valuable source of Utopian energies.

Consider what might be termed 'the practical hardware of everyday life'. Thanks to post modernism and cultural studies we are familiar with those accounts which analyse the symbolic connotations of the consumption of various objects. The emphasis has been on signs, meanings and identity. However, not only do people symbolically reuse objects once they pass into everyday life, they also invest then with new and disparate use-values. A banal example would be the multiple uses to which a daily newspaper may be put, none of which are intended by the producers of that object. It is this fluidity of use-value that undermines accounts of consumption that locate the significance of objects entirely in their sign-value. Use-value is not destroyed after obtaining an object and unexpected utility may arise from the unlikeliest of objects.

We need to consider the physical make-up, qualities, and attributes of the objects used in everyday life. These properties are expressed in terms of the kind of 'engagement' that the material culture of everyday life of-fers. The American philosopher Albert Borgmann gives the example of the musical instrument as an object which deeply engages a human being and, he gives the example of a television programme as something that typically fails to engage. Moreover, the full development of human capacities that can result from the fullest engagement with the artefactual world results in and rewards self-realization. Conversely, lack of engagement, or 'user disburdenment', attenuates the possibilities of self-realization. The history of commodity capitalism has, according to Borgmann, been the history of growing disburdenment and of diminishing engagement. Much of this has been technologically driven as improvements in the performance of materials and components has produced functionally more efficient devices. In this, a

certain amount of disburdenment has been welcome as it has freed people from the many tiring and time consuming chores associated with the operation and maintenance of functionally simple devices. However, beyond a certain point, engagement is reduced to such a minimum that knowledge and understanding of the object itself becomes increasingly obscure. This produces further disburdenment, manifested, for example, in the inability to effect simple repairs on increasingly complex objects. More and more there is little correspondence between the mechanical components and the surface decoration of objects. Disburdenment is doubly reinforced as the complex mechanisms are increasingly hidden from view, and hence not open to engagement, and, as the surface appearance of objects increasingly becomes disjoined from their functional capacities.

Calling for rediscovery of engagement with material culture, Borgmann asserts that, 'The world of engagement has two principle settings, a large one in the city and a small one in the home; and both of these have a daily and a festive side' (1995: 17). Daily engagement in the city is manifested in everyday errands and spatial practices that appropriate public space in ways including walking, sitting, reading, eating, and playing. Despite the increasing rationalisation of public space, such engagement is constantly recreated as new and old spaces are appropriated and reappropriated. Borgmann insists on the importance of distinct places including bars, cafs, restaurants, and street furniture in order for engagement to be maintained and reproduced. There is also festive engagement in the city. Borgmann laments the destruction and neglect of communal festivity and its transformation into commodified spectacles and privatised consumption. He urges the return of the communal festival to city life as a means of expressing and aiding the self-realization that such festive engagement can generate.

Borgmann also seeks to distinguish between the everyday and festive modes of engagement in the home. Such daily engagement is manifested most obviously as housework. Whilst critical of both the highly gendered division of labour that characterises most housework and, the burdensome nature of many domestic tasks, Borgmann claims that it does at least represent the extension of peoples selves into the texture of their own environment. He argues against the technological elimination of all housework, via the merging of automation with service industries and, also against its social elimination through the use of domestic servants. Technological elimination produces a sterile environment of highly disburdening devices while, social elimination is

unjust and iniquitous. The Utopian visions of the 'de-materialised' household seem particularly bleak in this regard. Disburdenment is almost celebrated or, at least, is represented as an aspiration.

Festive engagement in the home is best exemplified by activities including the culture of the table, conversing, story-telling, reading and, the culture of musicianship. So, the culture of the table includes both activities of daily engagement such as the preparation, cooking, and cleaning up associated with eating but, 'these yield to festive engagement through the celebration of a meal that engages and delights body and soul' (ibid: 18).

In terms of the objects involved in such social practices, Borgmann draws a clear distinction. On the one hand, there are those paradigmatic technological devices such as microwave ovens, whose experiential qualities are primarily visual and which tend to reinforce disburdenment. On the other hand, there are those objects that disclose their properties including shape, weight, heat conductivity, surface texture, sound, and so on. Objects that invite engagement are distinguished by the multitude of their experiential qualities and by the disclosing power of those properties. These provide a much more convivial and fulfilling interface between humans and the artefactual world. They are often conspicuously absent in many Utopian representations.

One pertinent experiential quality that objects may disclose, and which Borgmann does not discuss, is the passage of time. The disclosure of the passage of time is manifested by deterioration in the quality of materials, in visible marks of ageing, in technical and stylistic deterioration and through the changing symbolic associations with which objects are imbued. Together these features form a further aspect of the temporal aura of an object. The disclosure of time in relation to material culture becomes significant when considering Utopian visions that are characterised by an eternal present of unbreakable plastics, non-fading fabrics and, untarnished surfaces.

When the objects of material culture are viewed in these ways, it becomes increasingly difficult to define what use-value actually involves. Most of the commodities that become the objects of everyday life are obviously useful in some sense. However, the kind of analysis offered here suggests that those interested in Utopia should discriminate between objects that further the de-skilling, devaluing, and diburdenemnt of everyday life and, those which help to restore conviviality, vernacular subsistence, and engagement and hence help to bring about self-realization. Whilst, as Gorz (1980) points

out an emancipated society should be one in which the most environmentally benign, durable, and functionally efficient goods predominate these criteria alone are not enough. Rather, Utopianism should be concerned to distinguish and promote those objects, tools, and devices which maximise conviviality, engagement, autonomous control, and democratic self-management. This should be done not merely to produce a material environment that does not actively impede self-realisation and de-alienation but, to produce an environment that forms part of, and actively aids, such developments.

Conclusion

Such an analysis raises significant points in relation to the stress laid in Utopian thought on the sensual and erotic emancipation of the body with its material environment, both artefactual and natural. The physical and experiential qualities of that nature, with which sensory reconciliation is sought, must surely be significant. The focus in many accounts of emancipation or de-alienation has been almost exclusively on the subject. However, undervaluing the nature of the material environment in which bodily emancipation is to take place results in a partial and undialectical account of what the reconciliation between subject and object may actually involve. Whilst it is often asserted that humans produce a material second nature which, in turn, has a reciprocal effect upon those who produce and use it, the shadow of crude environmental determinism has resulted in a lack of detailed accounts of this relationship. As a consequence, fully dialectical analyses of the relationship between the body and the material world especially its artefactual components are rare. Where they have been developed, such accounts tend to focus on the built environment, rather than on the commodities that form the material fabric of everyday life. A Utopianism rooted in everyday life and the city must take account of the objectness of both of those environments just as it must take account of the nature of their temporal and spatial constitution.

In terms of material culture, here are the qualities which should be integrated into representations of life in the Utopian city:

1) **Dwelling**: the Utopian city will be a city of spatial difference not spatial homogeneity. When architecture is made synonymous with building as a noun the art of living in a place or 'dwelling' is lost. Building as a

verb should be central to the vocabulary of Utopian thought. Self-build, vernacular architecture, nomadism, neglected spaces, allotments, graffiti, recovered and reused materials will all be part of the Utopian city. Dwelling is the 'imaginative counterpart to physical living…dwelling requires that this person "feels" at home' (Willis 1999: 147).

2) **Conviviality**: a Utopia of moving walkways, personal jet-packs and food pills represents a mode of living with alienation. An instrumental, technological rationality dominates and the consequence of that is an inevitable erosion of sociability, community and conviviality. This perfect vision is rejected. If the Utopian city is perfect what is there for us to do? The Utopian city will have dirt, weeds, smells, noise and pets. People will work and play, labour will be minimised. Conviviality is 'individual freedom realised in personal interdependence' (Illich 1973: 25). Sharing, lending, giving and co-ownership will dominate mass personal ownership.

3) **Engagement**: a Utopia of shiny plastics, untarnished materials and push-button gratification is a sterile triumph of alienation over engagement. The Utopian city will be replete with musical instruments, freshly prepared food, wine and story-telling. It will be a world that includes and embraces wood, greenery, shells, stone and water. It will be permanently unfinished, eclectic and bountiful with historic signs of both memory and anticipation. Such signs will address, 'The need for auratic objects, for permanent embodiments, for the experience of the out-of-the-ordinary…' (Huyssen 1995: 33).

4) **Festivity**: festivity will be central at all scales of activity from the loving preparation of food through the culture of the table, the culture of music and art, in both domestic and public spaces. Play and profligacy will have a place. The autonomous squandering of the times and spaces of the city will help to produce a Utopia of process rather than one of spatial form. 'Let everyday life become a work of art' (1968: 204) demanded Lefebvre, such that self-conscious activity can imbue objects, gestures and relationships with a style that has long been lost in daily life.

Bibliography

Augé. M (1995) *Non-Places: Towards an Anthropology of Supermodernity.* London, Verso.

Banham. R (1976) *Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past.* London, Thames & Hudson.

Bletter. R. H (1993) 'Waiting for Utopia', in Yelavich. S (1993) ed, *The Edge of the Millenium: an International Critique of Architecture, Urban Planning, Product and Communication Design.* New York, Whitney Library of Design.

Borgmann. A (1995) 'The Depth of Design', in Buchanan. R & Margolin. V (1995) eds *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies.* London, University of Chicago Press.

Conrads. U (1970) ed *Programmes and Manifestos in Twentieth Century Architecture.* London, Lund Humphries.

Ewen. S (1976) *Captains of Consciousness.* New York, McGraw Hill.

Fishman. R (1984) 'Utopia in three dimensions: the ideal city and the origins of modern design', in Alexander. P & Gill. R (1984) eds *Utopias.* London, Duckworth.

Gartman. D (1994) *Auto-Opium: a Social History of American Automobile Design.* London, Routledge.

Graham. S and Marvin. S (1996) *Telecommunications and the City: Electronis Spaces, Urban Places.* London, Routledge.

Gorz. A (1980) *Ecology as Politics.* London, Pluto Press.

Hall. P (1984) 'Utopian thought: a framework for social, economic and physical planning', in Alexander. P & Gill. R (1984) eds, *Utopias.* London, Duckworth.

Harvey. D (1996) *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference.* Oxford, Blackwell.

Huyssen. A (1995) *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia.* London, Routledge.

Illich. I (1973) *Tools for Conviviality.* London, Calder Boyars Ltd.

Lee. M. J (1993) *Consumer Culture Reborn.* London, Routledge.

Lefebvre. H (1968) *Everyday Life in the Modern World.* Harmondsworth, Penguin.

Lefebvre. H (1976) 'Reflections on the politics of space'. *Antipode* Vol 8, No 2, 1976.

Lefebvre (1996) 'The right to the city', in Kofman. E and Lebas. E (1996) *Henri Lefebvre: Writings on Cities*. Oxford, Blackwell.

Lichtenstein. C & Engler. F (no date) *Streamlined: a Metaphor for Progress*. Zurich, Lars Muller Publishers.

Moles. A. (1995) 'Design and Immateriality: What is a Post Industial Society?', in Margolin. V & Buchanan. R (1995) eds *The Idea of Design*. London, The MIT Press.

Mumford. L (1966) 'Utopia, the City and the Machine', in Manuel. F (1966) ed *Utopias and Utopian Thought*. Boston, Houghton Mufflin Co.

Robins. K (1993) 'Prisoners of the City: Whatever Could a Postmodern City Be?', in Carter. E, Donald. J & Squires. J eds (1993) *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location*. London, Lawrence and Wishart.

Schivelbusch. W (1978) 'Railroad space and railroad time', in *New German Critique*, 14, 31-40.

Segal. H. P (1985) *Technological Utopianism in American Culture*. London, University of Chicago Press.

Sennet. R (1990) *The Conscience of the Eye*. London, Faber & Faber.

Willis. D (1999) *The Emerald City and Other Essays on the Architectural Imagination*. New York, Princeton Architectural Press.

Wilson. A (1992) *The Culture of Nature*. Oxford, Blackwell.