

## WHAT ARE UTOPIAS FOR?

*Article written by Ljubo Georgiev and Anita Stamatoiu for the Autumn 2011 edition of Edno magazine*

<http://edno.bg/en/slowfeed/za-kakvo-sluzhat-utopiite/>

Some of architecture's greatest ambitions have always been to imagine, to look ahead, to bring change. Often architecture has been charged with the task not only of making the world a better place, but also of transforming mankind. Whether architecture can actually make a difference by giving shape to bold ideas is the main topic of the 2011 edition of Sofia Architecture Week, entitled "Architecture Unlimited?" The event will explore the extent to which architecture can (still) function as a transformative tool for the urban environment in an age in which utopian ideals have been replaced by city marketing, and making improvements to the cityscape is often subordinated to making a profit.

Bold ideas are not only a phenomenon of the present day or the recent past. Even in the most distant ages, visionaries dreamed of perfect worlds of harmonious co-existence. Most often these worlds were expressed in the forms of cities, perfect cities.

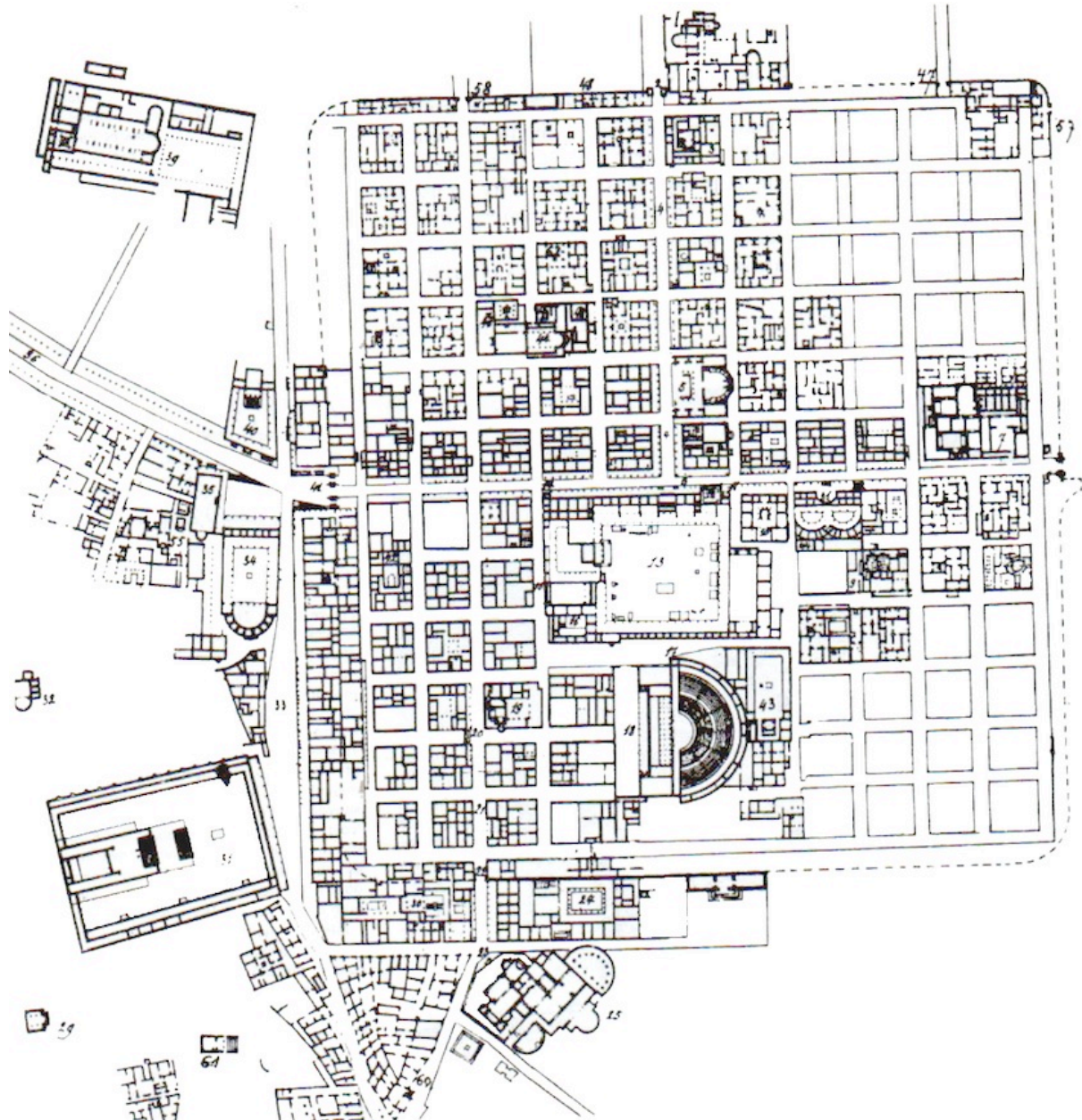
The following examples show this dimension of (architectural) utopian thought. They demonstrate how highly ambitious architecture has often been in the past in tackling the task of changing the world.

## IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE IDEA

The ideal city as a reflection of human aspirations for idealised life can be found in every major culture across the world. This time it did not all start in Greece... but in China. The Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE) developed a vision of organising the country according to the sacred geometrical principle of the Magic Square. According to the Chinese, an ideal society could take shape through an ideal division of space: from the private home to the entire universe. A couple of centuries later in The Republic, Plato described a perfect society aimed at constantly educating its citizens in the ideal city of Kallipolis.

*The Republic (ca. 380 BC): one of Plato's most famous works concerning the definition of justice, order and a just city state. The utopian city that The Republic describes is called Kallipolis.*

These models developed separately, but they both advocated an idealised environment, in which society could harmoniously proliferate. Some people took these ideas quite seriously, however, and many Chinese capitals (Chengzhou, to begin with) or Greek cities (Pireaus) would try to follow these philosophical models. Like many other Greek inventions, the Greek model was adopted by the Romans, who established their cities upon a uniform grid, characterised by the *Cardo* and *Decumanus*. This was a universal system for spatial orientation, which had its roots in the desire to control the whole world, but which also implied a distinct social order.



*Cardo and Decumanus: the main north-south and east-west axes of a Roman city, respectively. In the case of Sofia: Vitoshka/Maria Luisa and Tsar Osvoboditel/Todor Aleksandrov.*

## AN ECLECTIC WORLD

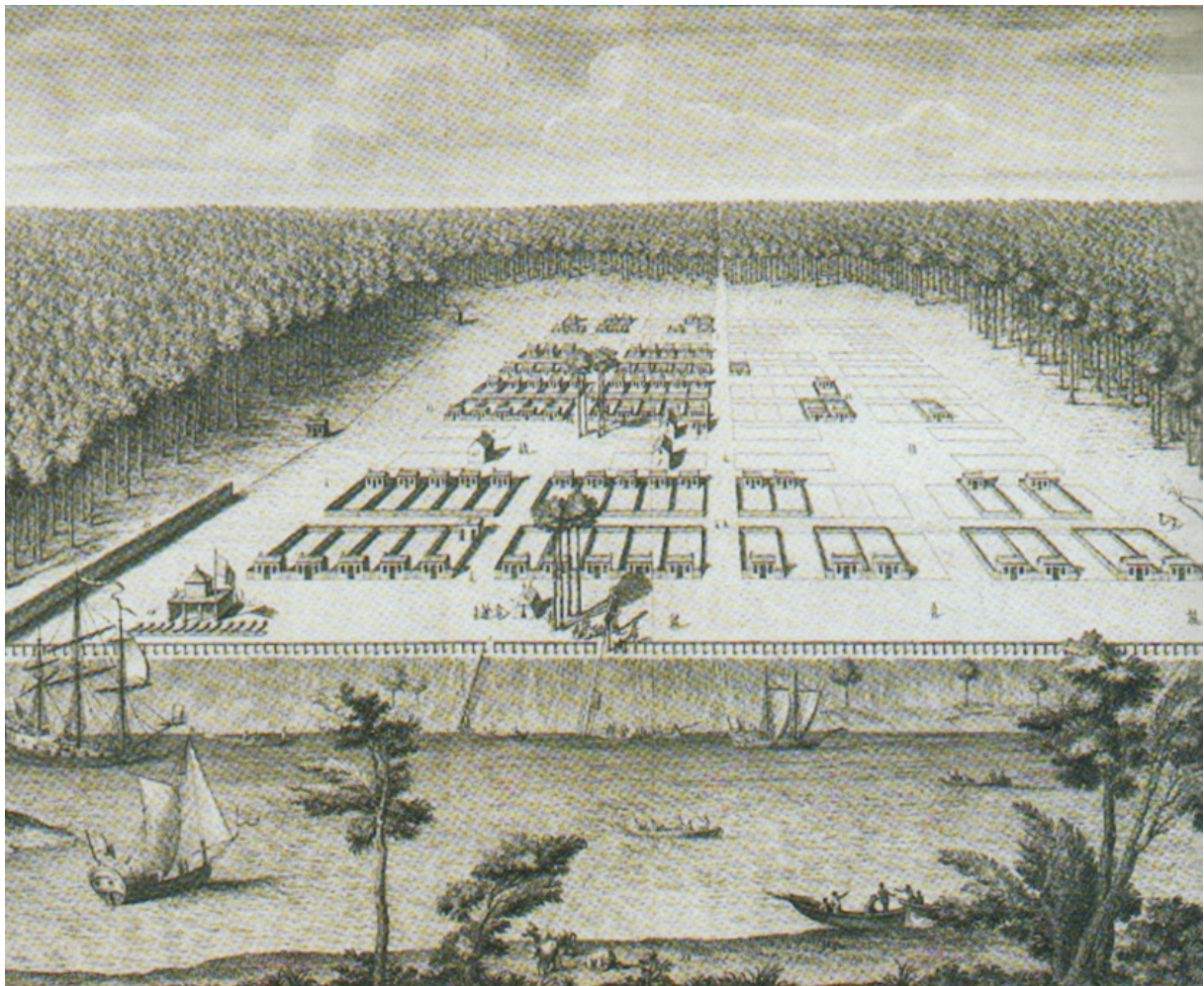
Centuries later, advances in maritime transportation, as well as the invention of printing, offered new means and horizons for communicating visions. This resulted in utopian ideas that were often a mixture of ancient principles, exotic stories and commercial interests. Thomas More, for example, was strongly inspired by ancient stories and was the first to use the term "utopia" in his book *Utopia* (1516). The title meant "no place," while the book



depicted a fictional island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean where there was no private ownership, with goods being stored in warehouses and people requesting what they needed. There were also no locks on the doors of the houses, which were rotated between the citizens every ten years.

Although More called his book *Utopia*, he was not the only one to fantasise about possible worlds. The Renaissance brought us detailed descriptions of ideal cities organised according to ancient principles of geometry and astrology, such as Filarete's *City of Sforzinda* (1465). Not only geometry, but society, too, was supposed to be "ideal". In Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1623), goods, women and children were held in common, whereas Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) was characterised by generosity and enlightenment, dignity and splendour, piety and public spirit.

The conquerors of South America were looking for such mythical worlds when they set out in their search for the Indies. Having found a land of untamed nature, wealth and fertility, European idealists would soon engage in building a utopian Christianised society far from the burdens of Europe. This impulse towards aggressive implementation of an ideal continued all the way up to the late 20th century with the plan for Brasilia: a newly built Modernist city in the middle of the Amazon jungle.



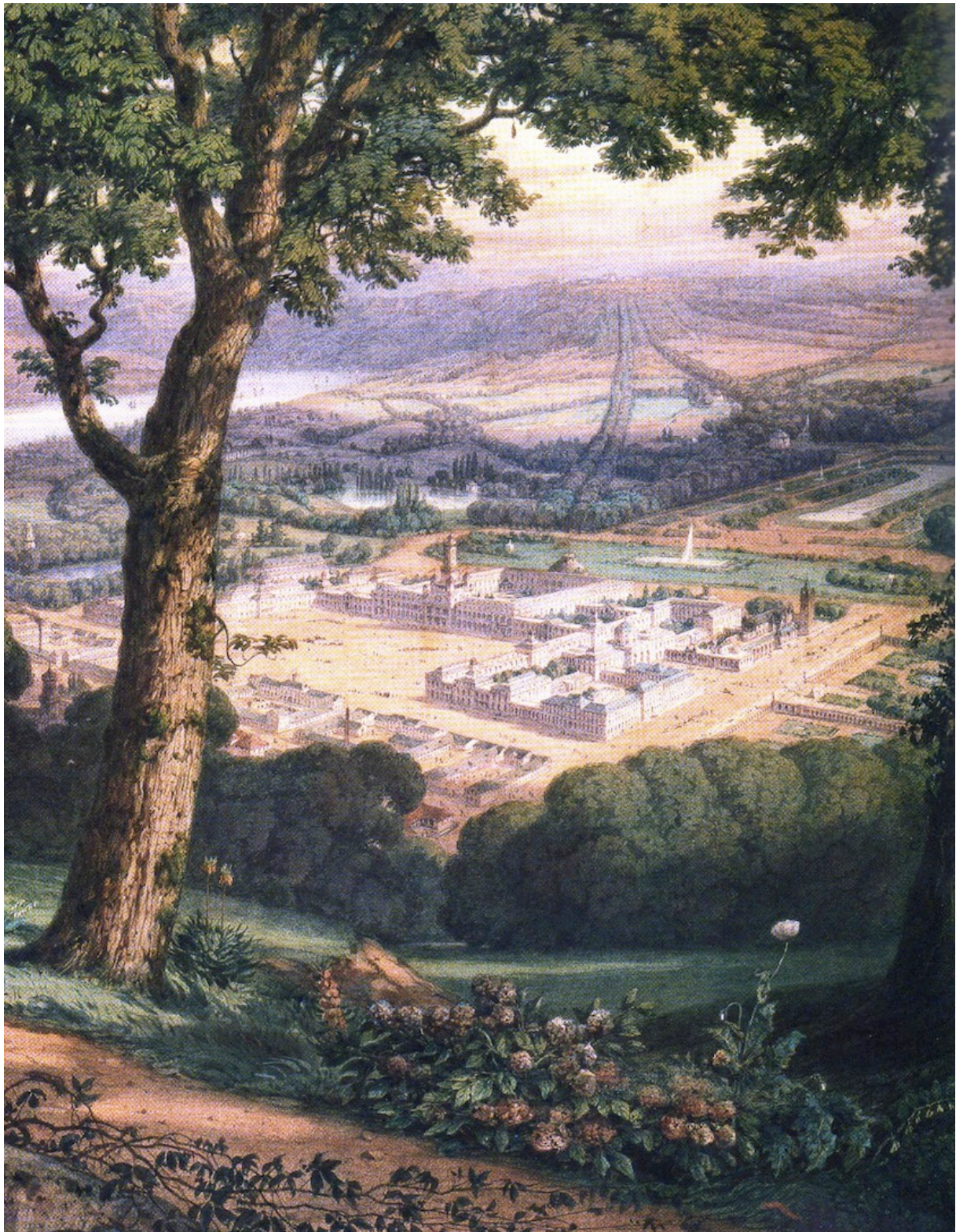
## JUST DO IT

Such utopian thoughts finally saw a chance at realisation with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. In order to fulfil their dreams, people suddenly had not only political will at their disposal, but also the power of the machine.

Industry did not provide only opportunities, however. It also brought about the rise of the great industrial cities, crowded with poorly paid and unhealthy workers who lived in terrible conditions. The avant-garde socialist Charles Fourier spoke out for these people, developing



the concept of the Phalanstère (1808): detailed plans for a remote community of around 1,600 people working in cooperation for a mutual purpose. Lack of financing prevented him from seeing his grand-hôtel in the real world, but later in the same century Godin in France and Ruskin in the US set up working colonies that took their inspiration from Fourier's work.



*Phalanstère (early 19th c.): a building designed to house an ideal autonomous community of 1,500-1,600 people. The building would contain all living, working and leisure activities. Visitors would have to pay to enter.*



Fighting social injustice and terrible living conditions was the main driving force behind industrial utopias. King Camp Gillette wrote *The Human Drift* (1894), a social plan that envisioned Metropolis, a three-level mega-city of millions of people, built on the site of Niagara Falls and getting its power supply from the waters. Ebenezer Howard took refuge in traditional values in his description of *The Garden City*, a planned settlement built in harmony with nature. Led by such ideas, Unwin and Parker made building the garden cities of Letchworth and Welwyn possible. A contemporary flashback to the garden city utopia is American suburban sprawl: an “ideal” environment of coexistence between man and controlled nature.

### THE NEW MAN

Inspired by the power of the machine, some visionaries decided to set the bar even higher. Societies all around the world embarked on a quest: to build the New Man.

*The New Man: the ideal individual, which most 20th century ideologies (fascism, nazism, communism) were aiming to create. The New Man would need no gods, he would be a rational, integrated, altruistic and hard-working member of society.*



Architecture played an important role in achieving that. Modernism was the name of the game and it aimed not only to provide hygiene and harmony, but also to create a new society, here and now.

The dwelling machine, rooted in the utopian, anti-historic Futurism of Marinetti and Sant'Elia, was part of a new world of standardisation and prefabrication, but also of speed and urgency. It described living in terms of family size, economic expenditure, functionality, circulations, sun light and health issues. Following his manifesto *Vers une Architecture* (1923), later revised in *La Ville Radieuse* (1935), Le Corbusier took praise of technological advancement and renewal to a utopian degree in his project *Plan Voisin* (1925), proposing the demolition of a large part of old Paris to erect sixty-story cruciform towers. He considered his partially implemented vision in *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille, France, and in the master plan for Chandigarh (India), as proof of the success of Modernism.

*Unité d'Habitation (1952): a residential housing design principle developed by the Swiss architect Le Corbusier and realised for the first time in Marseille. Besides apartments, the*



*building also incorporates shops, sporting, medical and educational facilities, a hotel and a restaurant.*

*Masterplan for Chandigarh: designed by Le Corbusier for one of India's regional capitals. It is characterised by a division of urban functions, an anthropomorphic plan form, and a hierarchy of road and pedestrian networks.*





Architects soon grew bored with hygiene and technology, however. Constant Nieuwenhuys' New Babylon (1966) is all about playful man, making full use of his creativity in a totally automated world that does not rely on human labor. People move and inhabit as they see fit a super construction spread around the whole world. Using a similar approach, Archizoom, Superstudio and Peter Cook's Archigram have provided us with No-Stop City (1969), Continuous Monument (1967) and Plug-in City (1964), respectively, as some of the most enigmatic and radical visions of the future: mega-structures with no buildings, only massive frameworks without boundaries.

All was not bright and happy, however. A mechanised world also generated pessimistic utopias – or rather dystopias, bad places. Aldous Huxley's Brave New World (1932), George Orwell's 1984 (1949), and Anthony Burgess' A Clockwork Orange (1967) are only few examples. Rem Koolhaas' Exodus (1972) explores an architecture of rupture and isolation, based on walls and demarcations. He calls the people who would choose to inhabit his fantasy world "voluntary prisoners of architecture."

In the divided Cold War world, each of the competing camps was doing its best to implement its utopian vision of the future not only at home, but in so-called third world countries, as well. The communists sent architectural missionaries to Africa and South Asia to build cities of communal prosperity. The capitalists, on the other hand, praised private property and its finest manifestation: the single family home. Constantinos Doxiadis' vision for Ecumenopolis (1967) was the stereotypical capitalist city: made of the whole world, where urban areas and megalopolises fused and the world was a single, continuous city spanning the globe.

### DO WE REALLY NEED UTOPIAS?

Utopian ideas, or at least their spatial manifestations, seem to be getting easier to realise nowadays. The development of the Persian Gulf states, American urban sprawl, the European museum cities and China's urbanisation all show that we do not merely want to dream - we want to live in dreams.

The temptation of the unknown, or rather the natural attraction towards change and evolution, has led visionary minds to construct ideal projections of future societies: paradises inhabited by man and governed by the laws of harmony and prosperity. No-where places. And that is what they must remain!

Utopias, and the use of architecture for their implementation, have often been extremely overburdened with expectations about their ability to stimulate social or economic change. Utopias are not meant to be used as blueprints for real-life projects; history has shown that such attempts most often fail. Utopias are much more useful as instruments to reflect on reality, with the hope of stimulating change.

