

2nd Cyprus International Conference on Educational Research, (CY-ICER 2013)

An Innovative Approach in Architectural Education: Designing a Utopia

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Abstract

Architectural design education requires a process oriented studio environment that involves creative thinking and hands on experience. It is suggested that utopias may be a valuable teaching tool within this studio environment. Despite the long history of utopias in architecture itself, they have been underutilized as studio teaching material. Utopias may be offered as readings, i.e. Platon's 'The Republic', Thomas More's 'Utopia', and Francis Bacon's 'New Atlantis', but also as avenues of exploration. This paper describes the process undergone in a first-year basic design course of an architecture department, where utopias have been utilized as an educational tool to foster creative thinking skills. Specifically, the process involves the creation of a utopic scenario about 'An Alternate 2012', in a different World following a fracture in time. Students have been assigned with creating new life forms and appropriately designed living spaces. The design process and final products are presented. Potential benefits of this innovative educational approach are discussed further in the article.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Huseyin Uzunboylu, Near East University, Faculty of Education, Cyprus

Keywords: Design education, basic design, Utopia, creative thinking;

1. Architectural Design Education & Utopias

Architectural design education is a process that revolves around studio courses. Design studios require an environment that fosters creativity and experiential learning. Students of a design studio need to gain the proper skills for creative problem solving and critical thinking. Salama (1995) defines the design studio as being the primary environment for teaching potential architects the creative skills to produce socio-behaviorally appropriate, three-dimensional spaces.

Architecture students are obligated to design the functional and aesthetic spaces that house human activities. Through this individual learning and creating process, participants also interact with fellow students and instructors thereby enhancing their communication skills and group working abilities. Schön (1985) describes the architectural

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studio as a prototype of ‘education for artistry and problem-setting’. He also states that the design studio environment is a place for students to learn both about designing and about learning to design (Schön 1985).

In this context of producing a creative environment for design students, utopias may become a tool to foster creative thinking. Utopia is the name of a fictional island, that theoretically has a perfect socio-political and legal system that is designed by the writer Thomas More, and described in the book with the same name ‘Utopia’ in 1516. Utopia comes from the ancient Greek word ‘ou’ meaning ‘not’ and ‘topos’ meaning ‘place’ (Liddell and Scott 1889). Utopian thinking and creation has a long history, starting from the third century BC; with Plato’s ‘The Republic’, then through the early and modern periods with Thomas More’s ‘Utopia’, Francis Bacon’s ‘New Atlantis’, William Morris’ ‘News from Nowhere’, to a recent work that was produced in the last century such as Italo Calvino’s ‘Invisible Cities’ (Halpin 2001).

For decades, science and philosophy have been in search for the ideal city and an ideal socio-economic and cultural organism within that city. These utopian thoughts and creations originated some widely known urban utopias. These utopias suggested new ways of life, communication, mobilization, production, and consumption, as well as new architectural spaces (Yurtkuran 2010). In 1925, Le Corbusier created a new vision for Paris named after an automobile manufacturer (Fondation Le Corbusier, 1925). ‘The Plan Voisin’ dealt with unfavorable conditions of the city; however, was met with criticism for offering class-based stratification, among other drawbacks. In 1964 Ron Herron proposed the ‘Walking City’ made up of robotic structures, congregating to share resources (Herron 1964). Both visions provide excellent examples of utopian thinking in urban architectural design.

Utopias were also used in the art of cinema. Considered the first futuristic movie, ‘Metropolis’ is a demonstrative example for an urban utopia. In 1927, Fritz Lang pushed the edges of technicality of that era and created a ‘perfect’ urban ‘dis-utopia’ (‘dystopia’ as is commonly used), which can be denoted as a dilemma. The city Metropolis can be defined as ‘cold’, ‘mechanic’, and ‘cruel’, as it emotionally consumes the people of Metropolis (Figure 1). The movie has an epic that communicates the real sociological disparities of the 1920’s within the context of pressure, reform, and peace (Newman 2005).



Figure 1. A Scene from Metropolis, 1927 (Void Manufacturing, 2008).

In 1982, Ridley Scott directed the 29 million dollar budgeted blockbuster Blade Runner, which was inspired by the 1968 book ‘Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?’ by Philip K. Dick. The work is another example of iconic utopia scenarios (Figure 3) (Barry 2005).

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