Moving Toward Utopia:

Looking to the Future of Urban Development

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March 2023
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Major: Architecture

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis Presented to the School of Architecture and the Honors Program at the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the RequirementS for the Degree of Bachelor of Design in Architecture with High or Highest Honors.

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ABSTRACT

The concept of utopia has been a contested topic of conversation in professions relating to the built environment for nearly a century. While it has been theorized, tested, and designed in several instances by some of the most prominent architects and urban planners in the world, the adaptation of a utopian society in the urban landscape has yet to be accomplished. This has raised questions about whether it is even possible to achieve such a momentous vision for society. As a society, we are keen to express our desires and test our ideas such that they may become a reality. With the advancement of technology over the years, the construction, architecture, and engineering industries have elevated to new levels of efficiency that have made seemingly impossible projects a reality. As an analysis of whether utopia may ever be achieved in the future, this thesis attempts to explore the theories guiding the principles of utopia, its adaptation in today's urban context, and the possibility of a future design methodology that could guide architecture and urban design toward a vision otherwise thought impossible.

INTRODUCTION

Society possesses an everlasting urge to outdo itself, express its desires, and push the boundaries for which it has already set. In regard to the built environment, the construction, architecture, and engineering industry has seen an astounding level of advancement year after year, creating extravagant structures and large-scale urban projects that explore the wonderous capabilities of the human psyche. Projects are getting taller, grander, more expensive, and seemingly more impossible to achieve at a logistical level all while attempting to balance social, economic, and environmental issues. Our ambitions as a society continue to test the limits of creativity and will continue to do so in the years to come.

One of these ambitions has been the idea of utopia, which to this day, has remained unachievable by all accounts. Over the years, prominent architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier have conceptualized what a utopian society could appear to be, and since then, architects and urban planners alike have designed numerous structures and urban development projects around the world that have reflected the ideas within this grand vision of society.[1]

To further explore the feasibility of utopia in relation to urban design and the evolution within the construction industry, this paper will utilize the Ørestad District in Copenhagen, Denmark as a means for analyzing urban design and architectural opportunities as a strategy for adopting the structure of utopian ideals. Additionally, my Design 7 partner project in collaboration with Antonio Solis titled *Omphalos* will explore the evolution of design in reference to creating wonderous and unique environments that emulate the character of utopian architecture.

1 Peter Fitting, "Urban Planning/Utopian Dreaming: Le Corbusier's Chandigarh Today," Utopian Studies 13, no. 1 (2002): 69–93.

Utopia (N): An imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect.

Our perceptions of the environments we experience are understood with our mind, body, and soul and it is the activation of these three that forms our basis for personality and what we find appealing. We are always seeking a sense of tranquility and satisfaction by escaping to places and moments that perpetuate these emotions. The soul is the guiding light in our search for utopia. However, because of the inherent differences between each other's pasts, characteristics, and ambitions, our personal perceptions of the ideal, the imagined, and the perfect, vary.

Italo Calvino says in Invisible Cities, "Between each idea and each point of the itinerary an affinity or a contrast can be established, serving as an immediate air to memory." Calvino suggests that our minds establish contrasts and differences in our experiences to formulate a catalog of memories to access throughout our lives.[2] We resort to memories as they often emulate feelings of happiness. Through this process, our minds envision the environments and create metaphysical recreations of the spaces for our souls to occupy.[3] These spaces are only to be experienced by the individual who manifested them. Therefore, the principles that guide the ideas of utopia are inherently individualistic and would have difficulty being adopted at a larger scale without a conflict of interest at the social level.

The idea of utopia already displays doubt in the ability for it to exist within the practical world. As a collective, we have understood that the conditions of a perfect society, or the perfect place, are simply unattainable due to numerous societal, economic, and political issues we face on a regular basis. Utopia in this sense remains as a collective dream, unoccupiable by physical presence; a fabricated reality that pertains to the mind of the individual as something to find comfort in, never to exist.[4]

2 Italo Calvino, "Invisible Cities," trans. by William Weaver, Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974, 15.
3 Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, trans. by Maria Jolas, (France: University of France Press, 1958), 5.
4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Eye and Mind, ed. by James E. Edie, trans. by Carleton Dallery, (Evanston, IL: Theories of Media, 1964), 3.

ØRESTAD: THE 'FUTURE' OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT

The Ørestad District is an example of how the concepts of utopian societies have evolved into the modern era of the built environment in a respectful and unassuming manner. Located in Copenhagen, Denmark, the district, divided into four distinct sectors, was created in 1992 as a response to the urban expansion of Copenhagen, thus propelling the development of the master plan for the area. (Figure 1) Ørestad as a district focuses on the pedestrian experience and offers its patrons and residents a tailored lifestyle influenced heavily by the successes and concepts deemed efficient by years of urban planning studies and projects around the world.[5]

Figure 1. Google Earth Diagram of the Ørestad district. The four zones of the district are displayed.

5 M.B. Jensen and M.R. Myklestad, "Ørestad – the Blue and Green Economic Driver in Copenhagen," Danish Ministry of the Environment, 2009, 1–6.

ØRESTAD: THE 'FUTURE' OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT

The architecture and design of the structures within Ørestad speak to the focus of the user by maximizing its property usage, utilizing a vertical model of construction that blends the needs of residents, often forming mixed-use structures that are designed with careful consideration for both its interior and exterior forms.[6] The Ørestad district features some of the most innovative architectural projects in recent years that have pushed the boundaries of design in terms of geometry, programmatic function, and ideas on the future of societal living. (Figure 2) Innovation is the heart of Ørestad's built environment, and its adoption of the utopian model has seen the district flourish in development, population, and outside attraction from international businesses and tourists.[7]

The Ørestad district acts as a playground for architects and urban strategists to experiment with their ideas capitalizing on the utopian appeal to create architectural projects that adopt seemingly outlandish characteristics. Utopia is often thought of in terms of its adoption of the imaginary, the unordinary, and the magnificent. The appeal of these structures is their capability to embrace the theme of this utopian urban fabric. (Figure 3)

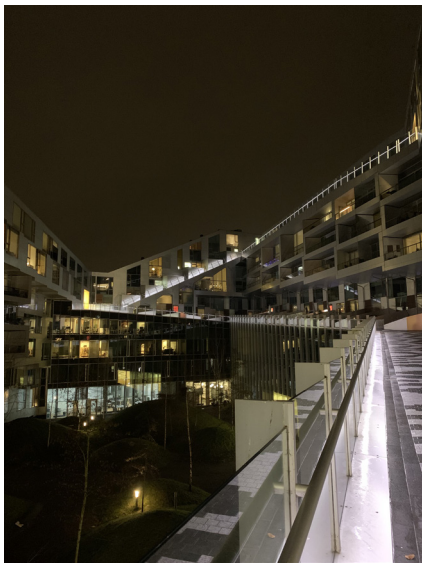

Figure 2. 8 House - Ørestad Syd. Picture of Interior Courtyard from the center axis bridge. Matthew Bean

> *"The concept of theming simulates a different time, culture, and world than the one that is physically lived… [theme parks] are created out of a play of illusion, dream, and fantasy. They are capable of concealing the absence of reality by substituting it with a much more perfect, convincing, and newer appearance. In this sense, they are much more than a mere representation of imagination. They assimilate the real world and produce simulacra in the appearance of a theme park: They turn dreams and fantasies into reality and spectacle, as much as they commodify them."*[8]

Figure 3. Residential Unit - Ørestad City. Picture of Residential Unit at Night. Matthew Bean

6 Christopher Karlson, "Case Study / DR Concert Hall," C Karlson: An Architectural Journey (blog), September 29, 2011, https://www.chriskarlson.com/blog/category/Denmark.
7 Deniz Balik and Açalya Allmer, "This Is Not a Mountain!: Simulation, Imitation, and Representation in the Mountain Dwellings Project, Copenhagen," Cambridge University Press 19, no. 1 (2015): 30–40, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135515000196.
8 Ibid.

OMPHALOS: UNITING EXPERIMENT WITH EXPERIENCE

New York City acted as the site for the Design 7 project titled *Omphalos* completed as a partner project by me and Antonio Solis in the fall of 2022. Through the development of initial research into the city, Park Avenue, more specifically, we understood that the city acts as a creative ground for architects and urban designers to adopt their wildest ambitions at the urban scale in one of the world's most populous cities. Similar to the Ørestad District, New York's encouragement of these ambitions has warranted the creation of wonderous construction projects.

Yet, while the Ørestad District works in the context of a newly formed master-planned district isolated outside of Copenhagen, New York City is a historic city whose urban personality works in a restrictive nature. The adoption of utopian ideals in each location has therefore evolved in very separate methods from one another. The Ørestad District, through its architecture and urban development, functions as a collective society whilst New York City works in isolated moments of new construction, forming a sporadic language across the city. (Figure 4) While this method can work to the benefit of forming the eventual utopia due to its inconspicuous and slow evolution of the city, it has forced each construction project to act as an independent node.

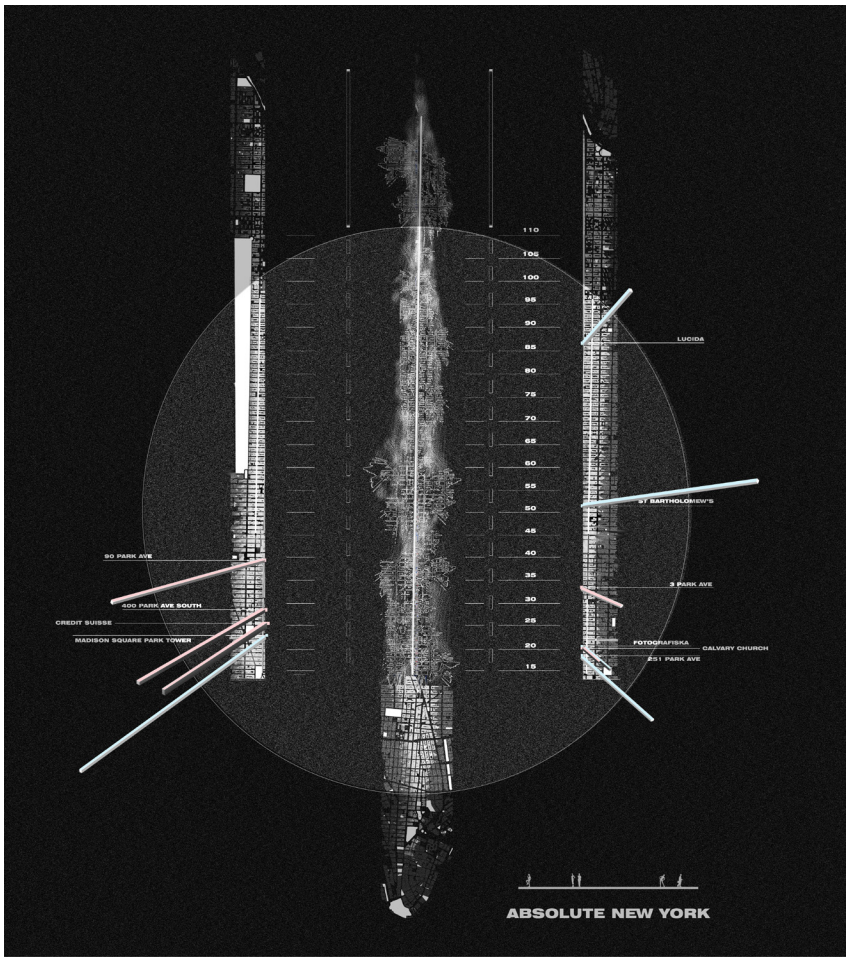

Figure 4. Park Avenue Building Map Diagram. Matthew Bean & Antonio Solis.

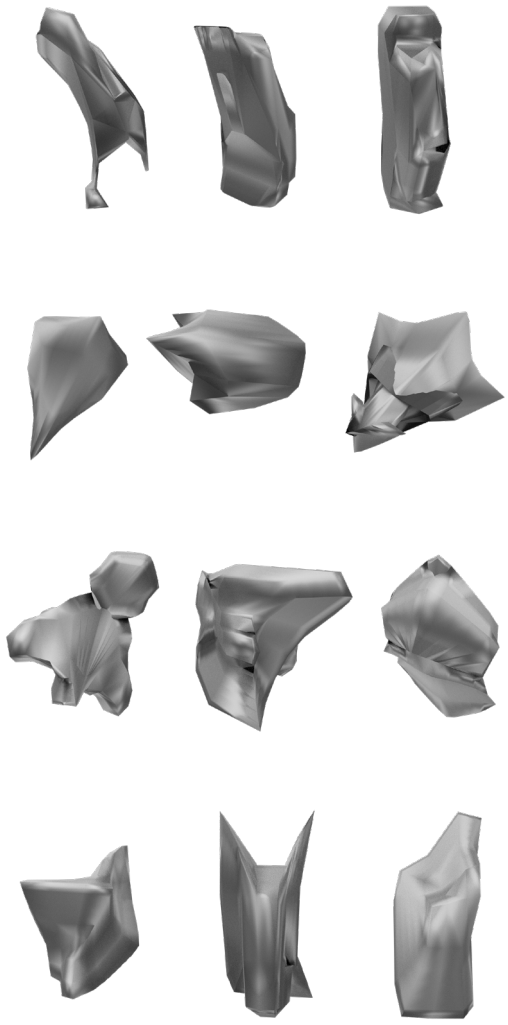

Figure 5. Sub-D Geometry Formations used for inital script from Rhinoceros 7. Matthew Bean & Antonio Solis

As a result of this, and the inherent drive of society to compete with ourselves, each new project has been forced to become its own utopia. Today's large-scale urban project in New York City features accommodations for the public through retail, restaurants, and shared spaces whilst also containing programmatic elements centered around private ventures for residential living and business spaces. As an attempt to separate themselves from one another, each urban project adopts ambitious methods of design that seem to continuously test the boundaries for creative thinking and logistical possibility.

Omphalos was ultimately guided by these principles and revolved around the question of how to create an architectural language otherwise distant from reality in order to formulate its utopian personality. The project thus adopted the program of the grotto spa as a means of bringing otherwise natural environmental formations into the urban fabric. We began with the ideas of balance and symmetry and worked to manipulate objects in Rhinoceros to form the language for the cave structure. Using SubD objects as the base component, a process of stretching and merging was used to create these unnatural forms. (Figure 5) The formations were then fed into a grasshopper script that forced the objects to continuously mirror themselves, creating final products that mimicked a unique cave-like structure that defines the language for the entire project. (Figure 6)

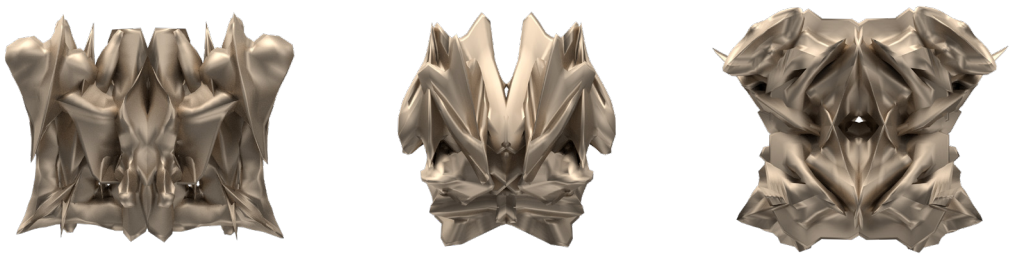

Figure 6. "Rock" Wall Formations from Grasshopper Script. Matthew Bean & Antonio Solis.

OMPHALOS: UNITING EXPERIMENT WITH EXPERIENCE

Due to the experimentation with computational techniques, the interior spaces of the project feature a complex design language that closely collaborates with the building's program of the grotto spa. (Figure 7) The consideration for having the main program of the project revolve around a spa came from initial ideas of creating an architectural oasis that emulated ideas of tranquility, peace, and relaxation. As previously mentioned, the mind and soul often search for places that allow for the recollection and creation of positive memories. We believed that the ambitious language of the cave structure in combination with the spa program would create a wonderous spatial and architectural environment for people to not only experience a state of peace and relaxation but to create vivid memories of a fantastical place that portrays the character of utopia within the city. (Figures 8-9)

Figure 7. Main Pool Rendering - Grotto Spa. Matthew Bean & Antonio Solis.

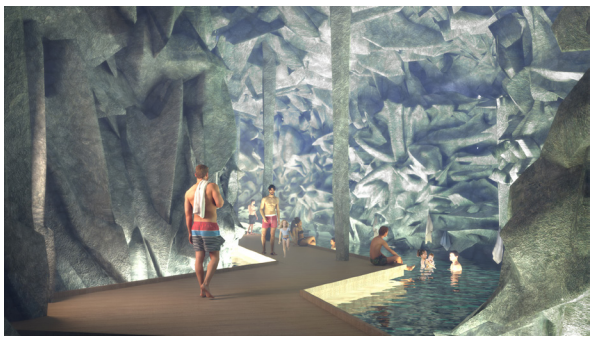

Figure 8. Hallway Rendering - Grotto Spa. Matthew Bean & Antonio Solis.

Figure 9. Hot Baths Rendering - Grotto Spa. Matthew Bean & Antonio Solis.

OMPHALOS: UNITING EXPERIMENT WITH EXPERIENCE

The *Omphalos* project follows the model of the 'new' urban development structure and features a balance of both public and private spaces that pertain to users' needs to preserve the vision of a utopian structure. The project's street-level and underground floors feature retail spaces and restaurants for patrons of the city to use. The next six floors of the building seek to encapsulate the thematic gestures and spatial components of the grotto spa, offering numerous types of pools and aquatic spaces complemented with spa amenities such as saunas, meditation rooms, and massage rooms. Users can also experience the rooftop pool that takes the patron outside of the interior cave structure and allows beautiful views overlooking Madison Square Park. The remainder of the public-use spaces, such as restaurants, bars, a gym, and office spaces are found in the smaller of the two building extrusions. Finally, the larger tower houses private apartments and penthouses and also contains its own private grotto spa for residents to use. (Figure 10)

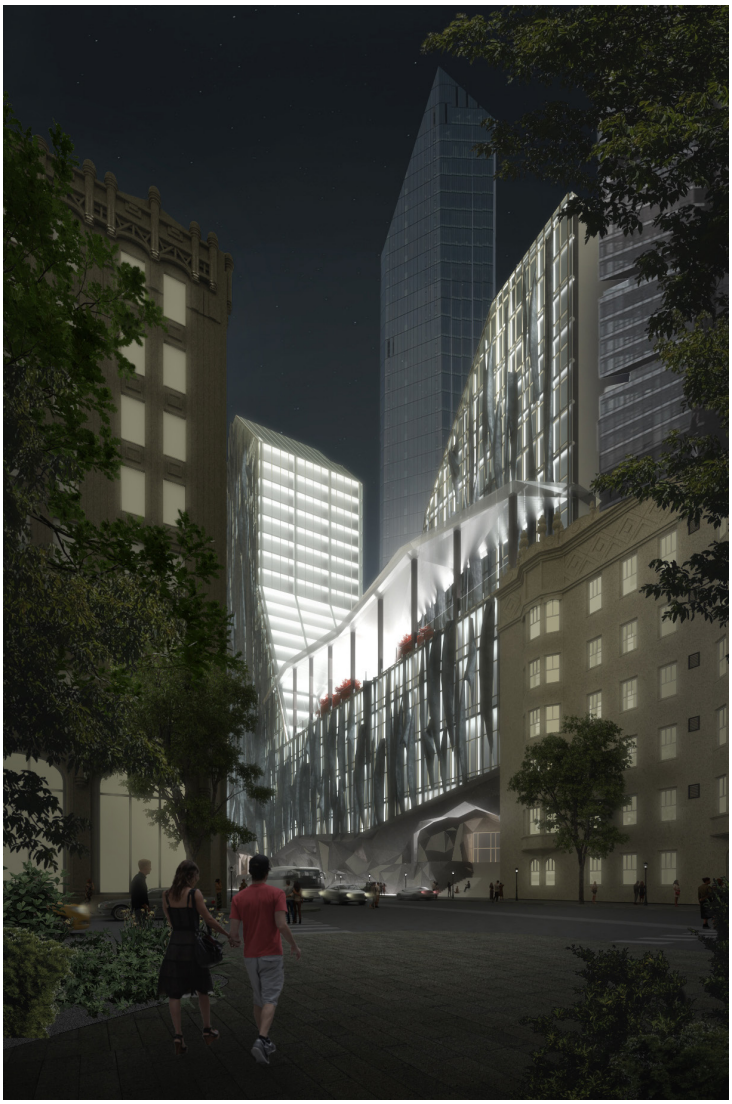

Figure 10. Exterior Rendering - Grotto Spa. Matthew Bean & Antonio Solis.

CONCLUSION

Our minds and souls are in constant search of the perfect environment for our physical selves to embody. As a collective society, we strive to reach further beyond what we thought capable in order to achieve and fulfill our wildest ambitions. To some, the idea of utopia, or the utopian society, has been viewed as the end goal in which to achieve inner peace. However, several urban projects, conceptualized cities, and larger societal issues have displayed the unfortunate fact that utopia is unachievable, at least, at the current moment.

Yet, this has not discouraged architects and urban planners alike to strive to implement ideas of utopia within their work. Projects at several scales in the built urban environment have begun to adopt the core principles that guide the ideas of utopia. Due to the evolution of technology within the design and construction fields, these ambitions once thought impossible is no longer based out of reality. Today's cities have become playgrounds in which our ideas of the future can evolve and will continue to advance in their level of urban cohesion and societal efficiency. As a result, utopia may not be as distant as we once thought.

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