

The Uses of Utopia
Four Perspectives on the Paradise of Today

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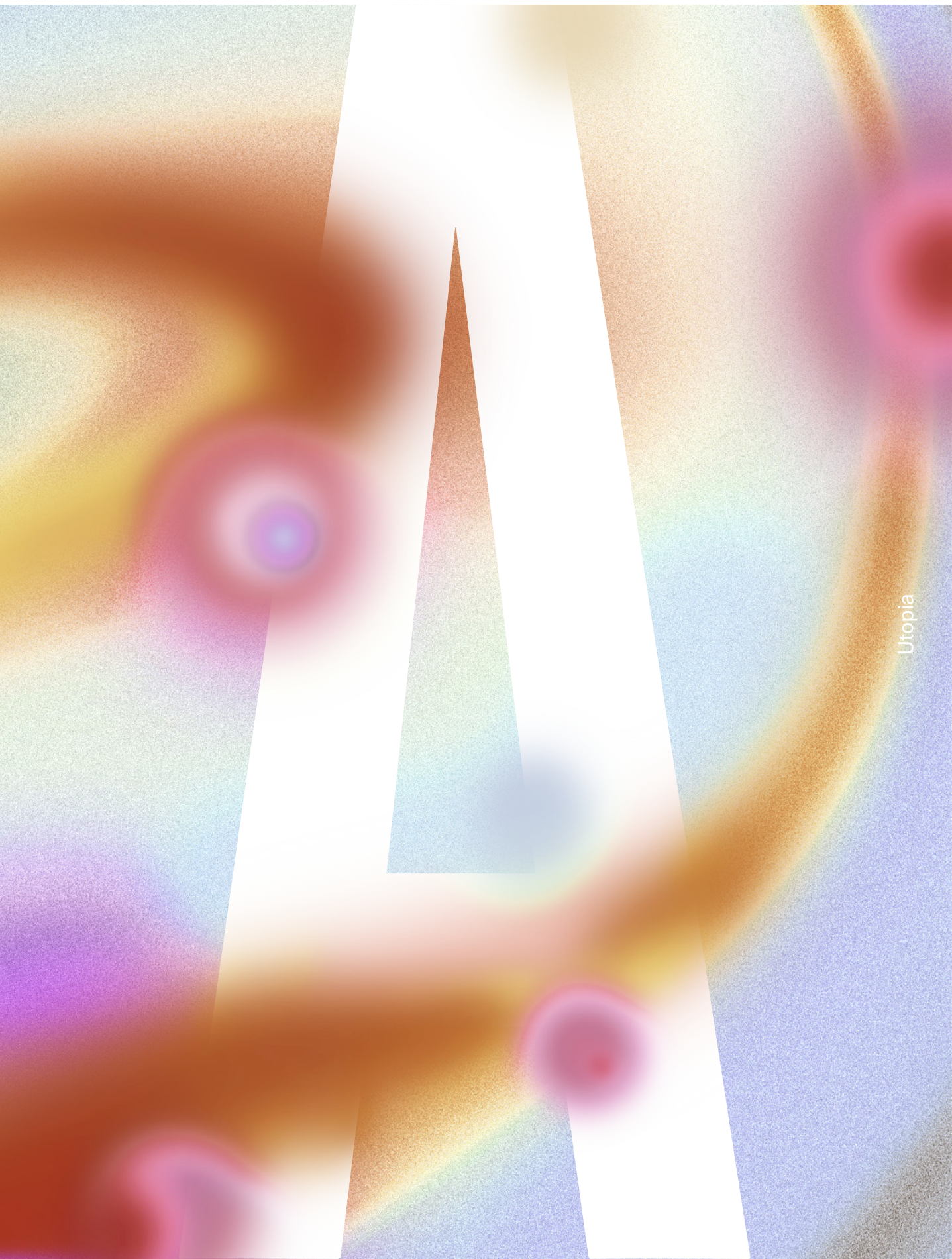
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Utopia

The Uses of Utopia

Four Perspectives on the Paradise of Today

In the format of a round-table discussion, we bring together voices from different department, sections and roles within TU Delft to explore questions arising from the current issue of the magazine.

Unlike the elusive concept of atopia or the grim reality of dystopia, utopia is a well-known vision of an ideal society, challenging us to rethink perfection in our complex world. As we delve into this timeless theme, each participant has provided their unique perspective, creating a mosaic of insights and examples that illuminate the aspirational landscapes of an imagined perfect world.

Stavros Kousoulas
Architecture Philosophy and Theory
Assistant Professor



As philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari claim, utopia is what links thinking with its own time and space: it is with utopia that thought (and, therefore, philosophy) becomes political. For them, the term utopia (unfortunate as they may be its misuses and the clichés derived from them) designates the conjunction of concepts and milieus, of thought and experience (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996).

Therefore, utopia is a verb and not a noun or an adjective: it refers to a process rather than a fixed state, to a line rather than a point. As such, it should be approached from an axiological perspective. In simple terms, axiology examines the values implicit in any act and its effects. In even simpler terms, axiology examines the *how* of an act in order to speak of the *what* of its results. *How* one (and apologies for the neologism) *utopianises* is, therefore, a much more important question than simply distinguishing among fixed utopian idealised endpoints.

In evaluating processes of *utopianising* we are essentially evaluating processes that bring concepts and milieus together only to allow for the potential of a radical transformation of both. For each *utopianising* effort, there is therefore a future (both spatial and temporal) that is about to emerge. This aboutness, this not-yet-here-and-now, which nonetheless has always been here-and-now, is architecture's greatest potential. If we acknowledge the limit (any limit) as the here-and-now of individuation, then architecture, aiming in the production of new processes of individuation, must deal with the (necessarily political) practice of finding new ways to perform a *utopianising* play of limits; a play on what is yet to come, unable to be communicated but able to inform a new world.

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Utopia, hope, cynicism and a call to dream

The original 1516 book "Utopia" by Thomas More retells a conversation he had with the fictional character Raphael Hythlodius about an island called Utopia, and its inhabitants, the Utopians, whom Raphael had visited on his travels around the world. He talks about a society that had overcome all the issues and woes that plagued Europe at the time and built the perfect system of government, including equal access to education, a balance between work and pleasure, collective ownership beyond money, and more (Notably this society made use of a lot of social control, didn't properly address misogyny, and any 'undesirable' work was carried out by convicts a.k.a. slaves - from our perspective not that utopian, but you have to look at this text from a 16th century perspective). More urges Raphael to put his knowledge to use in the service of a king to help better the lives of the people in Europe, but Raphael refuses, believing that he can't overcome the greed and self-interests of the ruling class, and the Utopian system is too far out of reach to be implemented anyway. After seeing Utopia and returning to the bleak reality of Europe, he has lost hope and has turned cynic.

Fundamentally, we planners and designers are in the business of selling hope. Only if there is a belief in a better future are we humans willing to invest ourselves above merely sustaining our current life. If our designs are fantasist, they risk being rejected as unreasonable, if our designs are meek, they fail to inspire anyone. I assert that Utopias, even if they sometimes lean into the fantastical, can be guiding stories to align our common hopes and dreams. In doing so we must avoid the fate that has befallen Raphael, to not lose touch with realism and view reality as hopelessly lost, to not turn cynical. The space between dull mediocrity and fantastical Utopia is our métier, and we must not just dream ourselves but inspire people to dream with us. Thus our profession leaves the studios and offices to go into society and inspire to dream, and be inspired by our fellow dreamers.

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Filip Chládek
Landscape Architecture
MSc Student



The term Utopia represents to me the Landscape Architecture studio on the second floor BK West, where we continue to draw the same ecological landscape toolboxes, agro-farming proposals and utopian changes to the Dutch polder landscape. Year after year we create the same unfeasible digital waste which fails to recognise the real drivers behind unsustainable farming.

During his goodbye symposium last November, biologist Sjef Jansen expressed skepticism about replacing the current farming systems with more environmentally friendly alternatives. Despite efforts, sustainable projects only seem viable on a small-scale, while the broader food system remains largely unchanged. Sjef concluded that during his 42-year career, ideas behind sustainable farming have been failing. A utopian vision that was simply not economically viable for the farmers.

The simple ideas behind the landscape approaches to farming and nature restoration practices are becoming an unattainable paradise, an ideal place that has started to crumble. The EU's is retreating from plans to cut pesticide use, to green farming practices, to ban toxic "forever" chemicals, to rein in livestock emissions and

to restore nature to 20% of Europe's land and seas.¹ Now, I don't really want to write about this, I just wish to express that the alleged conflict between academics and activists on one side, and farmers on the opposite side is shortsighted. We are all on the same sinking ship and we should be able to align the interests of the farmers and the landscape at the same time.

I also want to say that this has been overlooked in our LA design studios. It is very utopian to only study how we want the world to look and not study why that world is hard to accomplish. Perhaps, to come closer to the real-world Utopia of sustainable agriculture, we should give up on the naïve (utopian?) approach of the landscape department believing that we can design successfully without understanding the real power structures and forces behind why our visions and ideas are not a reality, yet.

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Machiel van Dorst
Environment, Behavior and Design
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A utopia of the past, a utopia of the present, and a utopia of the future...

A designer is someone that creates; makes something that is not there yet and strives for a better world. Imagining an ideal future is relatively easy, but shaping the present to align with this vision is challenging, and sometimes disappointing, especially when reflecting on how past ideals of the future have become part of history (hurray for modernism). However, lessons learned from the past and the challenges of our times compel us to continue striving for a better world. Are we still endeavoring to transform the present into a utopia? Is there room for naive dreaming, or are unrealistic proposals futile in today's world?

Perhaps we live in an era where naivety is a luxury we cannot afford, but dreaming remains intrinsic to life and the mission of designers. Examining past utopias while acknowledging present imperfections is both enlightening and cathartic. It is the juxtaposition of apparent imperfections within the perfect picture that renders utopias more relevant than ever. One of the most compelling examples is the inclusion of an Insane Asylum and an Epileptic farm in Howard's Garden City model.

In 2006, I wrote an article on informal living in Atlantis, wherein I described the squatted village of Ruigoord (near Amsterdam) as a utopia. As the observer (perhaps somewhat naive), I acknowledge now that informal living could be perceived as a dystopian image or simply a basic need for shelter. Yet, it is also a natural way of life, a form of communal living that predates formal and informal distinctions. While this natural way of life should not be romanticized, it may indeed represent the utopian ideal of a sustainable community—a utopia of the past. Yet, it is still there.



Above: Ruigoord 1999,
Bottom right: Ruigoord 2023

Same utopian natural way of living in Ruigoord. The Tower van Babel has been replaced by a tower with hydrogen, the dream lives on.

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From the Board

The yearly topic, -topias, was chosen as a platform for discussing themes which encourage critical thinking in addressing the multiple global crises we are currently facing. It's a testament to the board's commitment to fostering engagement and raising awareness about the complexities of our world. This issue comes out during the unfolding conflict between Hamas and Israel on the Gaza territory. The board would like to extend their condolences to everyone affected and support calls for ceasefire and respecting the human rights of Palestinian people.

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