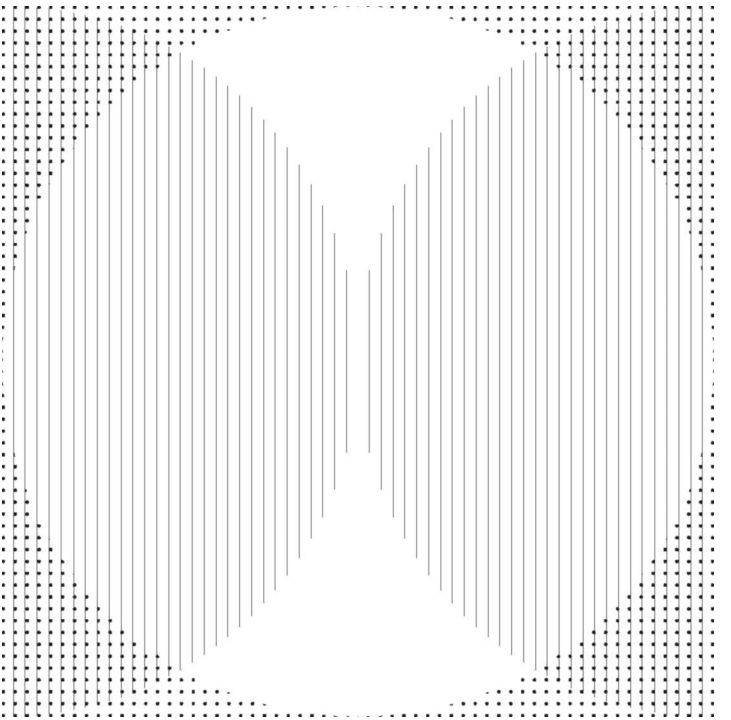
2 Imagined Worlds



"The modern world presents itself, on the surface, as that which has pushed, and tends to push, rationalization to its limit […]. Paradoxically, however, despite or rather due to this extreme 'rationalization', the life of the modern world is just as dependent on the imaginary as any archaic or historical culture." (Castoriadis 2005 [1987], p. 156)

2.1 Transformative Utopianisms: Utopia as Method

While the end of the 20th century has seen the concept of utopia sidelined as imaginary and unrealistic, societies nevertheless remain characterised by a pursuit of a good life – an unrelenting process of becoming informed by normative assumptions. As such, they remain deeply entangled with ideas on what it means to be human, what implies a good life, and by further extent what constitutes a good society. Consequently, they remain inextricably linked to *utopianism*, defined as the pursuit or thought of human flourishing. Nevertheless, while the pursuit of a good life is intrinsically human, the possibility of a transformation in a positive direction is met with great scepticism, not least due to a political realism insisting on the existing arrangements. As a result, utopia(nism) as a mode of conceptual thinking has been pushed to the side, most notably in the discipline which for centuries has been one of the primary loci for utopian thought. "Who doesn't have a drawer overflowing with designs for an ideal city?" said the first issue of *Éspace et Société* in the year 1970 (cited in Pinder 2013, p. 35). In fact, throughout history, the underlying assumption that architecture makes life 'better' has linked architecture and utopianism significantly closely. However, even back when the field was openly saturated with utopian thinking, utopia stood in as a synonym for the fixed contours of the ideal city and as such linked to totality, finality, and perfect-ability.[1] To this day, the fact that it is dismissed and mistrusted rests on precisely these assumptions and as such on an limited understanding of what utopia(nism) might be about.

1 It was especially the introduction of systemic architectural education in the 18th century which shifted the centre of architecture from the material object to the *ideal* object. This emphasised the idea of architecture as the product of the mind and therefore privileged the process of thought (and therefore the knowledge of the architect) (Kaminer 2011). See also subchapter *6.2 Rethinking Architectural Education*, p. 130.

Originating in neo-Marxist as well as feminist thought, from the past 50 years, intellectual debates from various disciplinary fields have not only made many attempts at redefining the concept into more open-ended, processual, knowingly incomplete, and less idealised accounts, but criticised the very idea of materialised utopias, if not suggested its material impossibility (Coleman 2013b, 2014b, 2015; Grosz 2002; Harvey 2000; Lefebvre 1997 [1974]; Massey 2005).[2] "At no point can there be a final shape for a city" (Madanipour 2010, p. 13) and at no point will it ever be ideal. Nevertheless, such redefinitions to this day remain largely absent in architectural education, where the understanding of utopia as a spatial object endures. This is quite surprising given the multifarious and substantial ways in which architecture is linked to utopianism. Most times, architecture attempts to contribute to human flourishing and, as such, makes suggestions about what implies a good life and what it means to be human.[3] While utopianism therefore mostly tends to be *implicitly* embedded in architecture (wishing to 'improve' life), it can also be *explicitly* so (wishing to guide or transform society in a particular direction). Nevertheless, philosophical conversations about architecture's position, expectations, and tasks within the pursuit of human flourishing remain largely absent, even in democratically oriented societies.

Over the past few years, however, *explicit* utopianisms have started to partially re-emerge in wider societal debates (for example in the forms of Universal Basic Income, the 4-Day-Week, De-Growth Models, or the Doughnut-Economy). As such, there exists a possibility for architecture to take part in these conversations, not only for architecture to socially re-engage, but to make architecture part of an urgently needed larger societal conversation. Such a moment was briefly achieved at the beginning of the Covid pandemic in 2020, for example, when the question 'how will we live in future cities?' became ubiquitously and globally

2 See *4.2 Architecture and Utopianism: Space and Projectivity* for further discussion on its material impossibility.

3 Not so in crisis architecture, where utopianism remains largely absent. See subchapter *4.1 Crisis and Architecture: The Meaning of Architecture in Crisis Society*.

shared.[4] On the other side of the spectrum however, architecture is often entangled in exclusionary and sometimes even dystopian future scenarios.[5] Here, the future of architecture seems to rest on its technological ability to compensate for planetary ills. As such, a close examination of varying visions will reveal how thoroughly contested and power-induced distinct forms of utopianism can be. Thus, while the ways architecture is meant to contribute to a better life might vary, the positive ascription of this link nevertheless inherently connects architecture to utopianism.

However, this points to a decisive discrepancy between thought and pursuit of the good society in architectural practice and education. As Nathaniel Coleman has observed, "the complex relation between architecture and Utopia remains peculiarly undertheorized." (Coleman 2014b) While utopianism remains deeply embedded in architecture (the outspoken mistrust towards utopias notwithstanding), there is little to no room either for theoretical explorations on utopia(nism) beyond its historical context and traditional understanding, nor for scrutinising the underlying assumptions of such pursuits. Grounded in the broad absence of utopianism as a mode of critical inquiry for conceptual thinking about human flourishing on the metalevel, this subchapter therefore offers an examination of the updated philosophical and theoretical reconceptualisation of utopia as *philosophy, concept,* or *method*, or the *philoso-*

4 The ARCH+ issue '*Vienna – The End of Housing (as Typology)*', for example, took up the discussion of redefining housing in the light of recent societal changes by addressing it through the social question (Obrist et al. 2021). Another good example is the IBA_Vienna, Austria's first International Building Exhibition, that took place in 2022 on the topic of *New Social Housing*. It decisively refrained from constructing a lighthouse project typical for previous International Building Exhibitions and instead aimed at improving the processes needed to provide and create social housing. It thereby focused on the mediation of stakeholders, the creation of new synergies and networks, on communication, and on knowledge exchange (IBA_Wien 2022).

5 More on this in chapter 5 *Space-Times of Control: Problem-Solving Utopianisms*, especially 5.3 *Techno-Utopias: Utopianism 'Solving' Crisis*. For an elaboration of dystopian narratives of the future see 4.3 *Utopianism and Crisis: Time and Emancipation*.

phy of utopianism. It will be argued that the introduction of the theory of utopianism into architecture might be "a possibility for architects to engage in a kind of social and political thoughtfulness about their works" (Coleman 2014a, p. 53).

Utopianism is thus the general concept for thinking about or pursuing the idea of a better society on the metaphilosophical as well as metaphysical level. While thinking (theory) and pursuing (praxis) are related (Schmid 2005), they each entail different aspects. Whereas utopian thought involves different modes of thinking (see below), its pursuit is guided by the underlying context-dependent assumptions of society. As such, not only the *content* but also the *form* and *function* of utopianism might differ depending on the cultural and historical contexts. For example, striving towards the better society might take the form of incremental betterment versus bigger or faster achievements; guided by values or the pursuit of specific goals, paths, or visions. As mentioned, utopianism therefore might be more implicit or explicit. Decisive aspects for how the better society should come into being are a society's relation to *time* (e.g. How does society relate the past to the present? Is the future perceived as empty or promising? How fast should change come into being?); its relation to *space* (e.g. How does space account for the betterment of society? How is it (re)produced? What are the underlying assumptions of space?); society's relation to *the cosmos* (e.g. Does it believe in a higher power, fate and/or a purpose for humanity?); and society's *(self-)judgement* (e.g. Does society perceive itself as having the power or agency to influence wider circumstances?). Since these aspects will be reflected upon in more detail later in this book, this subchapter intends to shed light on the four modes of utopian thinking, namely *normative, critical, creative*, and *epistemological thinking*.[6]

(Re)considering what it means to live a good life constitutes the very core of utopianism. "To measure the life 'as it is' by a life as it should be

6 As defined by the author. Fátima Vieira has similarly defined utopian thinking into four categories, namely prospective, critical, holistic and creative thinking (Vieira 2017).

[or perhaps, as it *could* be] […] is a defining, constitutive feature of humanity. Human being-in-the-world means being-ahead-of-the-world" (Bauman 2003, p. 15, original emphasis, own insertion). Normative assumptions are therefore embedded in the human way of life. For Ernst Bloch (2016 [1959]), for example, the notion of human incompleteness is the driving force for the development of societies. As sentient beings, human existence is marked by transcendence, an ongoing process of contingent becoming, which Bloch describes as a sense of *not-yet*. Since this becoming is driven by a normative function, it is simultaneously marked by the notion of *more-than*. "We seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves" (C.S. Lewis cited in Levitas 2013b, p. 180). Normative thinking is therefore always a *temporal* and *anticipatory* operation, suspended between *is* and *ought*. It is a forward-looking process of making the future present (not to be mistaken with creating present futures, which would be the extrapolation of the present into the future). For Henri Lefebvre (2014 [1972]), for example, making the future present meant exploring *the possible* as a theoretical instrument for informing *the actual*. Reflecting on the possible would thereby be a means for stimulating change in present reality, which for Lefebvre reflected the basis for a critical spatial praxis (see also Vogelpohl 2012, pp. 77–79). "By articulating 'the not yet' it helps us to act in the actual world, defining objectives, giving direction to struggle and resistance, setting a political agenda and opening the door to creative dialogue" (Markus 2002, p. 15).[7] For Bloch, this unfulfilled disposition is furthermore imbued with hope, the longing for an optimistic transition towards the future.

Normative thinking therefore strongly relies on imagination. It does so, however, in a particular way – not simply to imagine a world, but to imagine it *otherwise*. *Creative thinking* is therefore a prerequisite for expanding imagination of what might be socially possible or rendering the impossible possible (with reference to Lefebvre, Chatterton 2010 and

7 The notion of the *not-yet* is well-reflected in the German word *Entwurf*, which means not simply *to design*, *plan*, or *create* – but *to design the* ***not-yet***.

Pinder 2013).[8] Creative imagination can give new insights, for example, through combining multiple and perhaps yet unconnected perspectives and therefore has the capacity to prevent foreclosure and keep possibilities open. Society in which creative imagination remains absent, in contrast, remains similar to its existing form. "Fighting for what is possible, known or easily achieved will only ever give us limited purchase on social change. Social justice and equality, and the dreams we have of a better world, lie in exploring and making real what currently seems impossible, unknown or out of our reach" (Chatterton 2010, p. 235).[9] What society has achieved thus far is after all indebted to people who have fought for what seemed once impossible. As such, creative thinking stands against the strictly rational and bureaucratic and works through spontaneity, play, the unexpected, and perhaps even the unconventional.

To be able to apply creative thinking in fruitful ways, however, implies a deep analytical understanding of social reality and stands in coherence with *critical thinking*. Defined by a sense of judgement and reflexivity, critical thinking allows the questioning of present assumptions. Therefore, "what makes a utopia utopian is dissidence: the divergence it outlines from, or the argument it makes against, the existing situation" (Coleman 2014a, p. 56). Linked with the anticipatory function of human becoming, critical thinking furthermore highlights the constant need for debate and dialogue. Insisting on the provisionality of what constitutes a good life, utopianism is therefore necessarily constitutive of many 're's': (re)thinking, (re)evaluating, (re)visiting,

8 It should be noted, that the tension between the possible/impossible gets differently attributed to utopia(nism) by varying intellectuals. For example, while Erik Olin Wright's idea of 'real' utopia's relates to turning the possible into an actuality, for Slavoj Žižek utopia is "not the art of the possible, but that of the impossible, and creates interventions and spaces that cannot be understood in terms of established symbolic framings" (Žižek cited in Chatterton 2010, p. 237). See also Wilson 2018 for a discussion on the difference between Olin Wright's *real* and Žižek's *Real* utopia. (For more on the Real see subchapter *4.1 Crisis and Architecture: The Meaning of Architecture in Crisis Society*).

9 See Knierbein and Viderman 2018a for more on urban emancipation debates.

(re)imagining, (re)debating, (re)considering, (re)introducing, (re)prioritising, (re)contextualising … As such, the critical mode of utopianism can be described as 'accepting little and questioning much' (Unger and West 1998, p. 32).[10] The creative and critical features of utopianism furthermore offer powerful tools for the method of *estrangement*: defamiliarizing the familiar, making the invisible visible, providing a distance from the existing. To many utopists, this aspect is *the* proper role of utopia(nism), rather than construing plans for the future (Levitas 2013b). As such, *estrangement* invites utopianism into the present, reminding us of the unrelenting possibility of an 'other' way of being at all times (Hage 2011, 2015). In such a conception, reality would merely be 'dominant reality', with minor realities existing simultaneously and in which we are always equally enmeshed. This depicts reality as a multireality instead, from which a myriad of futures could develop from.[11]

The fourth mode of thinking refers to "a 'utopian epistemology', which is arguably one of the most valuable functions of the critical utopian mentality" (Gardiner 2012, p. 16). Through reconsidering our ways of knowing (epistemologies), utopianism has the capacity to change the very nature of that knowledge (ontology). In this sense, utopianism has the capacity not only to question 'certain' and 'legitimate' truth-claims but to alter present assumptions about reality, including ourselves. Therefore, the very attempt of thinking about or pursuing

10 However, it will later be outlined, that 'accepting little and questioning much' alone no longer suffices, especially with regards to recent protest movements against Covid restrictions in which this form of 'critical' thinking has become co-opted and isolated. This subchapter is meant to give an introductory working definition of *transformative utopianisms* and will be explored in depth in *6.3 Embodied Utopianisms of Care.*

11 This conception is similar to Lefebvre's 'moments' which relate to "moments of presence within everyday life [through which] glimpses of a transformed world could open up" (Pinder 2013, p. 36, own insertion) as well as Walter Benjamin's 'full' conception of time (see subchapter *4.3 Utopianism and Crisis: Time and Emancipation*).

change has a changing feature: "Through changing our world, we change ourselves" (Harvey 2000, p. 234).[12]

Another crucial aspect of epistemological thinking is that it enables humans to imagine how utopia might *feel*. As such, utopianism (in the form of feelings, affect, desire, hope and imagination) can be considered as embodied knowledge. It is therefore through the human body that hope, desire, and imagination appear in materialised form. Subsequently, this directly connects theory to praxis since this knowledge is to be enacted upon in the here and now. The body therefore works as a hinge between utopian thinking and its pursuit.[13] This consequently places utopianism on the level of the personal and everyday. Such conceptualisations of utopia(nism) are heavily indebted to theorists such as Ernst Bloch (2016 [1959]) and Henri Lefebvre (2014 [1972]) who have attempted to bring theory and praxis into closer alignment, locating utopianism within material conditions, and attributing it to fleeting, contingent, and incomplete conceptions, "in the full knowledge that perfection or completion is deferred endlessly, and thankfully so" (Gardiner 2012, p. 10). What Bloch and Lefebvre referred to as 'concrete utopia' (see Gardiner 2012, Pinder 2013), or as 'everyday utopianism' (with reference to Lefebvre, Gardiner 2012), and others as 'embodied utopianism' (Bingaman et al. 2002b), all entail understandings of utopia(nism) which operate under the assumption that it is both a social activity and thought process, located in the here-and-now, and with the capacity to influence spatial practices. As mentioned, such understandings of utopia(nism) therefore politicise the present, reminding us that "[w]e have in us what we could become" (Bloch cited in Levitas 2013b, p. 185). This form of utopian thought therefore is often reflected in neo-Marxist

12 Or, in more philosophical terms, and perhaps the source for Harvey's line of thought: "If what (…) [human beings make] comes from … [them, they] in turn [come] from what [they make]; it is made by … [them], but it is in these works and by these works that (…) [they have made themselves]" (Lefebvre as cited in Knierbein 2020, unpublished, p. 46).

13 See 4.1 *Crisis and Architecture: The Meaning of Architecture in Crisis Society* for more on the corporeal aspect and overcoming the duality between the realistic-material and constructivist-cultural.

theories with the intention to influence the contemporary production of the urban landscape in its material as well as (post-)political condition (such as Jameson 2004, 2005 [1997]; Swyngedouw 2009; Wilson and Swyngedouw 2015b; Wilson 2018; Žižek 2012c) and to inform critical and emancipatory spatial practices (Chatterton 2010; Coleman 2012, 2015; Harvey 2000; Karim 2018; Knierbein and Viderman 2018a; Lefebvre 2014 [1972]; Pinder 2002, 2013).

As such, Henri Lefebvre (2014 [1977]) was a pioneer for theorising the everyday not only as a crucial arena of modern culture and society, but for stressing its potential as a site of creative resistance and liberatory power. Since the city is made and remade each day through everyday experiences, it is "the landscape of the everyday out of which change can arise" (with reference to Lefebvre, Coleman 2015, p. 10). It is in the everyday that "imagination is becoming a lived experience, something experimental" (citing Lefebvre in Gardiner 2012, p. 11). Therefore, "[a]mbiguous like all in-between spaces, the everyday represents a zone of social transition and possibility with the potential for new social arrangements and forms of imagination" (Crawford 1999, p. 9). According to David Harvey (2020), similar thought has already been shared by Marx who has insisted that thinking about an anti-capitalist transition would mean changing the very nature of human beings, which for Marx meant how we organise and rationalise our daily choices. "If we are going to change human nature, we have to change daily life" (ibid.).

It is, however, important to stress that while such understandings of utopia(nism) locate utopian thought in the present rather than construing blueprints for the future, it still remains important to create hope-filled visions which can be collectively shared, affecting[14] and informing society in a dialectic fashion, especially in times when crisis thinking

14 Referring to *affect theory*. Other than emotions, affects are generated through specific material conditions and sensed in dynamically relational ways. For more on *affect* see subchapters *4.1 Crisis and Architecture: The Meaning of Architecture in Crisis Society* as well as *6.1 Agency: Architecture's Political Dimension*.

has diminished imagination.[15] Furthermore, these conceptualisations reveal that "the future of utopianism lies, not with the pursuit of an overarching 'consensus' […] or the belief that social cohesion must be premised on a uniformity of belief and thought […] but in the realization that diverse utopian visions should not only coexist, but enter into dialogue and contest, on a continual basis, each other's core assumptions and values" (Gardiner 2012, p. 9).

A redefinition of utopia(nism) along these lines therefore opposes the static, abstract, total, and perfect visions of utopia in which reality is fixed for all time. They question the assumption of a world resistant to further change and stand against the self-evident. Furthermore, they locate utopia(nism) in the innovative forces of everyday life rather than carefully planned or abstract master plans. Integrating utopianism as a (feminist) methodology in architecture would therefore imply a shift in focus from creating buildings as objects to buildings entangled in social processes and their contextual embeddedness. As such, its introduction could bear the capacity to redefine the very meaning and purpose of architecture. To put it in a nutshell, "architecture's limited capacity to influence society is less an argument against any role for utopia in architectural invention than it is an argument for why a utopian dimension is crucial" (Coleman 2014a, p. 52). Coleman contends that utopian thinking would in fact enable architects to play an active part in the configuration of the social environment.

However, it should be emphasised that since utopianism and its philosophy underly normative assumptions, both must be brought under equal scrutiny as the realities they want to tackle. In a way, the introduction of a utopian methodology into architecture is a utopian project, given the persistent insistence on orthodox methods, tools, and ways of thinking in the discipline. Since utopia(nism) as philosophy essentially is a *method* or *way of thinking*, its effectiveness lies within the way this method is turned into practice. As such, there is nothing intrinsically

15 See subchapter *4.3 Utopianism and Crisis: Time and Emancipation* for an explanation on how crisis thinking has affected imagination. See subchapter *6.3 Embodied Utopianisms of Care* for more on hope-filled visions.

emancipatory nor authoritarian to utopianism, since this is dependent on its *form*, *function*, and *content* (including the underlying assumptions). How effective a utopian methodology eventually will turn out to be therefore not only depends on the qualities of utopian thinking but on the methods of implementation. Therefore, while utopian thinking can provide beneficial insights in countless ways, there is no one-solution-fits-all for its application and as such it can become highly contested. This means that one should be attentive not to idealise utopian methodology as the new panacea, which could result in reselling a romanticised, perhaps even pre-defined solution under a new name. Sabine Knierbein, for example, has brought to attention how the recent increase in relational approaches in architecture must be wary of possible co-optation by capitalist forces in order not to "run risk of losing their emancipatory capacity" (Knierbein 2020, unpublished, p. 313). Similar alertness concerns the everyday, which one should be equally cautious to idealise. A superficial reading could reinforce "the commodity condition of academic production, where the everyday becomes simply a fashionable logo for repackaging familiar goods" (Highmore 2002, p. 28).

Having said this, in elaborating significant points for addressing utopianism in architecture and urbanism, David Pinder has highlighted that "[t]he first is the need to attend critically to utopian impulses currently at play within conceptions of cities and urban spaces, and to uncover the desires and dreams that underpin conceptions of urbanism. […] How are ideals of the good city and good urban life, including those of urban elites, being mobilized now and to what ends? How might uncovering these enable the specific interests they embody to be criticized?" (Pinder 2013, p. 42). Following this inquiry, this book therefore attempts to analyse various power-induced forms of utopianism and their underlying assumptions existing in architecture in the context of multiple crises today. Since it is however equally important to counter such visions with hopeful and creative alternatives, this book will also provide speculative and normative considerations which could act as a promising basis for different forms of utopianism.

> This is perhaps one of the main messages […]: that we have a role to play in these crisis-riddled times, which will start with re-evaluating our own professional agency through radical politics, value systems and actions. We need to increase our own reproductive capacity as specialists and citizens, who look into our uncertain future with hope (Petrescu and Trogal 2017, p. 13).

2.2 Social Imaginaries

Human beings have the capacity not only to imagine the world as it physically exists, but to imagine a conceptual world beyond. This conceptual world is not simply made of mere fantasies and dreams, but is a reflection of a human-made symbolic world made of collective stories and meaning. Even though this world only exists in our minds, it still has real and material consequences on our lives. Everything human beings have created, material and immaterial, is a consequence of this conceptual world, manifested in human culture, artifacts, social norms, rituals and collective beliefs. "[Hu]man is an unconsciously philosophical animal, who has posed the questions of philosophy in actual fact long before philosophy existed as explicit reflection and [hu]man is a poetic animal, who has provided answers to these questions in the imaginary" (Castoriadis 2005 [1987], p. 148, own insertions). This imagined world, or imaginary, creates a sense of belonging and common objectives. It acts as the reason or motivation for human behaviour and establishes structures and contexts to human life. This capability of creating mutual stories, or narratives, is pivotal to human existence since it is the basis of collective life. Not only can human beings imagine this constructed world individually, but they can do so collectively. It binds them together in large numbers, allowing for cooperation even beyond borders.

This imagined conceptual world has not only been of interest to sociologists. Anthropologists and historians, such as Yuval Harari (2015), have identified the ability of collective extensive imagination as *the* distinct human trait, distinguishing human beings from all other species

on this planet.[16] Having the ability to create collective stories with collective intentions is believed to be the key reason for *Homo sapiens* to have outlived other human species, despite not having had the biggest brain capacity. "[H]uman beings are especially sophisticated cognitively not because of their greater individual brainpower, but rather because of their unique ability to put their individual brainpowers together to create cultural practices, artifacts, and institutions" (Tomasello and Moll 2010, p. 331). To describe this phenomenon, anthropologists have introduced the term 'shared intentionality' (borrowed from philosophy), sometimes also called 'we' intentionality (ibid.). It describes the collaborative interactions in which humans share psychological states with one another and serves as the "psychological foundation for all things cultural" (Tomasello and Carpenter 2007, p. 124). Central processes and aspects of shared intentionality are the ability for cultural learning, teaching, and normativity. The normative judgement "is essentially a judgement based on the perspective of the group – how 'we' do things" (Tomasello and Moll 2010, p. 343). This means that "[a] child raised alone on a desert island, or even by chimpanzees, would cognitively not be very different from the apes, as its unique adaptation for absorbing culture would be intact but there would be nothing there to absorb" (Tomasello and Moll 2010, p. 332). Human beings thus come into a world full of social and cultural context and, as human beings, do not exist outside of it. None of it has been created individually, but through collective interactions, and has developed into increasingly sophisticated systems of cultural and cognitive complexity over time.

These contexts are thus always specific to a certain society and define what, for a given society, appears as 'real'. "Every society up to now has attempted to give an answer to a few fundamental questions: Who are we as a collectivity? What are we for one another? Where and in what are we? What do we want; what do we desire; what are we lacking?" (Castoriadis

16 While there are other species who can imagine too, the imagination of human beings is unique because they have specific learning capabilities which allow for appropriation and building on the imagined, allowing the increase in complexity over time.

2005 [1987], p. 146). Even though these questions may not be explicitly posed, they are always embedded in the social imaginary of every society. Answers to those questions, "neither 'reality', nor 'rationality' can provide" (ibid.) but are implicit in society's way of life. "Society constitutes itself by producing a de facto answer to these questions in its life, in its activity. It is in the *doing* of each collectivity that the answer to these questions appears as an embodied meaning" (ibid., original emphasis). Reincarnation, the American dream, the nation state, human rights, money or corporate cultures thus are all myths that initially only exist as part of our conceptual world. As long as people believe in them, however, they are rendered credible and lead people to act upon them. The myths, rituals, norms, and symbols that make up human imaginaries are thus a reflection of a particular way of life specific to a certain society. They are an articulation of the way humans see the world and how they place themselves in it. Social imaginaries "create a proper world for the society considered—in fact—they are this world and they shape the psyche of individuals. They create thus a representation of the world, including the society itself and its place in this world" (Canceran 2009, p. 26).

As the imaginary refers to myths and idea(l)s, it has, from the moment of its conceptualisation been linked to ideology (and somewhat later also to utopia). However, "it has always been assumed that the imaginary is a mere reflection, a specular image of what is already there" (Thompson 1982, p. 659). The most widespread understanding perhaps is Karl Marx's (1845) analogy of ideology as a *camera obscura*, in which reality appears upside down, as an inverted or distorted perception of reality. In his critique of Marx, Karl Mannheim (1929) was the first to bring together ideology and utopia (see also Sargent 2010). While Marx described both the ideas of the oppressed as well as the ideas of the ruling class as ideology, Mannheim distinguished these ideas in defining the latter as ideology and the former as utopia.[17] Mannheim

17 While ideology "reflects the desire of identifiable groups to block change to protect their own status; utopia reflects the desire of identifiable groups to bring about change to enhance their status" (Mannheim as cited in Karbasioun 2018, p. 84).

thus described ideology as a tool for enforcing and preserving the current form of domination, which he opposed with utopia offering radical alternatives. While ideology would seek to cover up its deficiencies and utopia would perceive reality in urgent need of transformation, both would act as a form of distortion and prevent society to see reality as it actually exists. In opposing these two terms, Mannheim's theory thus preserves a dualistic and deterministic notion typical of orthodox Marxist thought. Traditional Marxism "has always situated reflection on the socialhistorical within an ontology of determinacy; it has always assumed that 'to be' has one sense: 'to be determined'" (Thomson 1982, p. 662).

It was only in 1975, when Paul Ricoeur (1986) brought those terms back together and argued for more nuanced understandings of both by placing them within the same conceptual framework, namely *the social imaginary* (Karbasioun 2018; Langdridge 2006; Sargent 2010). This set both concepts in a more complex and dialectical relation in which both could assume positive as well as negative effects. To Ricoeur's account this meant rendering "ideology as the symbolic, which serves to bond human culture through identity and tradition" (Langdridge 2006, p. 646), while depicting utopia as that which "projects a real and possible future rather than a fantasy and therefore enables a critical vantage point from which to view ideology" (ibid.). Rather than seeing ideology only as a source of legitimisation for authority or distortion of social imaginary, Ricoeur renders ideology as something constructive, since there exists a pre-existing symbolic system that precedes distortion. Seen this way, ideology acts as the mediating role between social action and meaning and as the preservation of social identities. Utopia, in turn, is seen as the rupture or challenge to 'what is', or, at its most profound level, as the "critical imaginative variation on this identity by forwarding practical alternatives that may be realized" (ibid., p. 654). According to Ricoeur, by creating "a distance between what is and what ought to be" (Ricoeur in ibid., p. 651) utopia therefore becomes a necessary condition to break out of a regressive cycle and transform the social imaginary into a progressive spiral. He thus conceptualises utopia as a powerful tool for rupture and critique.

In a similar vein, for Cornelius Castoriadis (2005 [1987]) the social imaginary is not a mere reflection or veil, but the framework through which human beings mediate and enact reality. This means that the imaginary does not only present the necessary means for society to *express* itself, it also provides the means for its identity to *come into being* in the first place. The "'icons, totems, symbols of religious authority and god are not only the expressions of an instituted authority; they [also] act as the means to constitute this authority as real'" (Castoriadis as cited in Kaika 2010, p. 456). Furthermore, Castoriadis too draws on the imaginative force of society to disrupt the status quo. However, whereas Ricoeur places the imaginative capacity to shatter present conditions within utopia, Castoriadis theorises the creative core in the self-instituting society through his concept of autonomy.

For Castoriadis, autonomy means people's ability to self-determine and self-govern according to their social imaginary. His conception of autonomy differs from the concept promoted by neoliberalism in that people act as collective agents and "recognise the contingency and invention of their world" (Canceran 2009, p. 30). Instead of self-reliance and independency, intersubjectivity plays a central aspect. In his concept, the individual is placed within the context of society since it is necessarily socialised. The individual is always embodied in collective society and therefore social autonomy implies and presupposes individual autonomy. Therefore, for Castoriadis, individuals that exercise their autonomy, actively participate in the making and remaking of society (Castoriadis 2005 [1987]). Thus, what makes a society autonomous, is its ability to self-reflect and distance itself from its own imaginary in order to reinterpret and recreate it. It recognises itself as the source and origin of its own existence and as such society can undo what it has created. According to Castoriadis, an autonomous society does not rely on external factors and is fully aware that there exists no external source for its institutions and laws. As such, it is self-instituting because it realises that it is society itself that has created these laws and therefore it is society too that has the ability to alter them. "By instituting itself, society inaugurates a new ontological form that could not be derived from the preex-

isting social order. This society is an offshoot of a rupture or break from the present world order in history" (Canceran 2009, p. 28).

However, this role of the social imaginary becomes increasingly difficult to accomplish in contemporary society due to the increasing role of bureaucratic organisation as society's institutional structure. "This organization reveals that the modern imaginary […] merely autonomizes and valorizes a limited, instrumental rationality. The modern imaginary is thus fragile and prone to crisis, endowing contemporary society with the 'objective' possibility of transforming what has hitherto been the historical role of the social imaginary" (Thompson 1982, pp. 664–665). This furthermore indicates that ideology is inseparable from capitalist societies, since the emergence of capitalism in modern societies undermined the transcendent reference to 'another world beyond'. "The distinctive characteristic of ideology […] is that it is implicated in the social division it serves to dissimulate; that is, the division is both represented and concealed within the world of production, and no longer with regard to an imaginary 'beyond'" (ibid., p. 672).

Nevertheless, Castoriadis rejects determinist ontological understandings, as implicit in traditional Marxist thought, since it "misses the essential feature of the social-historical world, namely that this world is not articulated once and for all but is in each case the creation of the society concerned" (ibid., p. 663). Furthermore, in modern societies the economy presents itself as the 'most perfect expression of rationality'. "But it is the economy that exhibits most strikingly the domination of the imaginary at every level – precisely because it claims to be entirely and exhaustively rational" (Castoriadis 2005 [1987], p. 157).

He therefore instead calls for an ontology of creation, which stands for "the emergence of radical otherness, immanent creation, non-trivial novelty" (ibid., 184). For him, imagination is the driving force of any revolutionary project. It is precisely his distinction between the *actual imaginary*, the ability to reflect an already constituted identity, and the *radical imaginary*, the ability to imagine in creative and different ways as they exist, which allows human beings to break out of any determinist circle. "If ideology and utopia are constitutive of the social imaginary and this in turn is constitutive of our lived experience of the world, then we cannot

escape the circle" (Langdridge 2006, p. 654). However, "these structures are as much the product of our ideologies as the cause, and therefore they are amenable to change should we collectively have the will to effect it" (ibid., p. 655). As much as society is shaped by its imaginaries, it is human beings who (re)produce these.

Thus, through the social imaginary society defines what for a given society is possible – and therefore also what is not. Tackling the social imaginary therefore becomes pivotal in rewriting urban narratives. If utopia has currently been sent to the back of our minds, it is either because other concepts have become more prominent in our imaginary (like crises, dystopian futures, or the glorification of the present) or because our ontological conception does not allow it (being more open to contingency and other forms of knowledge). The current narrative of rendering every form of utopianism unreasonable is an especially troubling one as it is imagination itself that is being threatened. If there is no need to envision alternatives, then there is no longer room for extensive imagination, leading imagination to dwindle – even in a discipline which has made this its key trait. However, as mentioned above, these concepts are human-made and thus they can also be unmade. As humans, we have to remind ourselves that there is always a possibility of being *other* than what we are (Hage 2011, 2015). To be able to deconstruct such (false) beliefs, however, we must first come to realise them as such, since "they appear to us as though they were things – as if they were a fate rather than what they really are which is our own creations naturalised" (Unger 2014).

2.3 Spatial Imaginaries

"The city as we might imagine it, […] is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate in maps[,] statistics, […] and architecture." (Raban 2017 [1974], p. 10, own insertion) That space exists not only as a physical entity, but is socially and culturally constructed and therefore imagined, is not an entirely new concept within the social sciences and has gained significance especially since the spatial turn of the 1980s. In

architecture, however, "space is abstracted and emptied of its social content, so better and easier to subject to control" (Awan et al. 2011, p. 29). While French sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1997 [1974]) famously argued that 'space is a social product' and 'architecture is a social practice' almost 50 years ago, within the discipline of architecture the aspects of the social production of space still bear little significance in comparison to its material production.[18]

While human geographers have been researching spatial imaginaries for over 20 years, reviews of this research are still surprisingly sparse (Watkins 2015). Like social imaginaries, spatial imaginaries refer to ideas about people, the environment, politics, or economy which are shared collectively. "In this sense, spatial imaginaries are closely tied to social imaginaries, and researchers often evaluate their interconnection. […] The difference between a spatial and social imaginary is a spatial imaginary's meanings are related to spatiality, while a social imaginary's need not be." (ibid., p. 510) For example, the concept of the nation state can relate to its spatial relations whereas an exclusively sociological or political framing would focus on shared pasts, language, lifestyles etc. On the other hand, however, imaginaries, even seemingly global ones, are always created within a specific place and time and thus have local origins. Attention to the spatial furthermore connects imaginaries to everyday life. "Social and geographic imaginaries are mutually constitutive and

18 In *The Production of Space* (ibid.), one of the foundational texts of the spatial turn, Lefebvre distinguishes between perceived (*espace perçu*), conceived (*espace conçu*) and lived space (*espace vécu*). Whereas perceived space refers to the physical space, conceived space refers to mental constructs or imagined space, and lived space is that which is modified in everyday life. This conceptual triad can be translated into spatial terms, wherein each space is furthermore produced in a different way: first, *spatial practice* (which produces the perceived aspect of space) is produced through the material production of space; second, *representations of space* (which produce the conceived aspects of space) are produced through the production of knowledge; and third, *spaces of representation* (which produce the experienced or lived space) are produced through the production of meaning (see also Stanek 2011).

intimately related to experiences and livelihoods pursued within specific historical geographic contexts." (Leitner et al. 2007, p. 12)

Like social imaginaries, spatial imaginaries can refer to competing ideas of 'reality' (such as concepts of successful urbanisation, globalisation or land use), 'othering' other realities in the process. *Othering* refers to the idea that certain people or places are seen as naturally different, meaning that some are rendered 'normal' whereas opposing groups or places are rendered as 'less than' in the process. Furthermore, spatial imaginaries can apply on different scales (ranging from outer space, supranational regions, nation-states, to cities, and the home). Depending on the approach or disciplinary focus there exists a wide range of different terminology. Some of them are *imaginary geographies, environmental imaginaries, spatio-temporal imaginaries,* or *socio-spatial imaginaries*, to name a few.

Regardless of the approach to spatial imaginaries, Josh Watkins stresses that these are all umbrella terms and obscure the fact that there exist three different types of spatial imaginaries, a differentiation that is allegedly often neglected. According to Watkins these are the following: (1) specific *places* (like Vienna, Manhattan, The Middle East); (2) *idealised spaces* (such as the ghetto, developed country, or global city); and (3) *spatial transformations* (such as globalisation, gentrification, or deindustrialisation) (Watkins 2015). Accentuating these distinctions can give further understanding as to how broader concepts are enmeshed within a local specificity and vice versa. While being interdependent, these terms tell different kind of spatial stories and different versions of 'othering'.

Place imaginaries refer to the characteristics that supposedly render a place unique and can refer to neighbourhoods, regions, cities, nation states, etc. There can also exist conflicting and competing spatial imaginaries of the same place, each 'othering' the competing interpretations. *Idealised space imaginaries* refer to more universal characteristics. They can be connoted positively (such as 'developed') or negatively (such as 'ghetto'). Whereas the positive framings usually argue that a space should stay that way, the negative framings indicate that a space should change. Therefore, idealised space imaginaries often become

incorporated into debates over the future of specific places. For example, "Golubchikov stresses that the idea of the world city has become a 'frame' through which governments pursue strategies to engender world city characteristics in the 'here and now', concluding that the world city imaginary materializes through concrete changes to urban policy and form, 'othering' different ideas of 'successful cities'" (Watkins 2015, p. 513). The third type, *spatial transformation imaginaries*, refers to narratives of how a certain place or space *did*, *should* or *will* change over time, thus incorporating "different ideas about what has been, is, or may come" (ibid.), such as globalisation or gentrification. Doreen Massey, for example, has shown that while in modernity space was understood by boundaries, today the general belief of unbound space is rendered inevitable and therefore leads people to act in ways that make globalisation possible, essentially turning it into a self-fulfilling prophecy. The idea that all boundaries are being transcended has thus been naturalised as 'truth' (Massey 2005). Accounting for these different types of spatial imaginaries can thus help better differentiate various meanings and idea(l)s embedded in different socio-spatial understandings.

While there exist three different types of spatial imaginaries, they can furthermore be distinguished into four different ontological conceptions which they are embedded in – *semiotic orders, worldviews, representational discourse,* and *performative discourse*. Whereas spatial imaginaries have predominantly been understood as *representational discourses*, more recently they are being defined as *performative* discourses, which emphasise embodiment and material practices.[19] This depiction therefore portrays them not as a static representation, but as a medium through which social relations are both reproduced and changed – in fact, very similar to Castoriadis' conception of social imaginaries. "In other words, spatial imaginaries are stories and ways of talking about places and spaces that

19 The conception of social imaginaries as *semiotic orders* and *representational discourse* relate more to linguistic phenomena and their linguistical representation in images and text, while their understanding as *worldviews* paint imaginaries as ideologies, as a shared system of ideas and beliefs.

transcend language as embodied performances by people in the material world." (Watkins 2015, p. 509) The performative aspect places value on people acting in relation to spatial imaginaries and thereby on the interdependency of material practices and imaginaries. The aspect of performativity sees space as produced through performances, emphasising material aspects of discourse, which has also been advocated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2014 [2001]). Seen through this lens, spatial imaginaries can be changed and created through material practices over time.

Yet, the most interesting aspect, namely how exactly these changes take place still needs more empirical exploration (Watkins 2015). So too within architecture, where the concept of how imaginaries (however often limited to the symbolic), space, and spatial practices relate to each other remains a disputed topic. However, "new (relational) approaches in urban studies have allowed the emergence of new ways of seeing change and paths for acting change" (Tornaghi and Knierbein 2015a, pp. 13–14), "elaborating on the relations between society […] and how (urban) space is actively produced by social agents" (ibid.). Opening up conversation to greater transdisciplinary dialogue therefore becomes necessary to further explore the meaning between space (production) and society.

However, while studying the relation between meaning and space is important for enacting change, it is also important to consider what new imaginaries should be constitutive of. If neoliberalism renders imagination superfluous, contesting socio-spatial imaginaries therefore must place imagination at the centre. "The failure of contemporary mainstream politics to capture (or inspire) imagination in the direction of achieving better—superior—conditions has arguably been as destructive to democracies and social life as the ideological emptying out of architecture has been for the realization, even partially, of the just city." (Coleman 2012, p. 322) Addressing imagination thus becomes inevitable in post-political debates, since repoliticising space essentially comes down to new visions and narratives. "A politically engaging urban […] research and practice is about changing the frame through which things and conditions are perceived" (Kaika and Swyngedouw 2012, p. 26). This too has been recognised by Gabriella Gomez-Mont, founder

of *Laboratorio para la Ciudad*, the experimental arm and creative think tank of the Mexico City government, which was active from 2013 to 2018. Made up of an interdisciplinary team of artists, policy experts, social scientists, data analysts, architects, urban geographers and many more, the lab functioned as a "place to reflect about all things city and to explore other social scripts and urban futures […] insisting on the importance of political and public imagination in the execution of its experiments" (Gomez-Mont 2019). For her, the power to co-produce starts with the right to imagine again, 'democratising imagination' so to say. "We must claim not only the city and its streets – not only its institutions and its policy – but also its possibilities, its social potential, its symbolic and imaginative capacities of our societies." (ibid.)