

Utopia

1. Definition

Utopia is the depiction of a non-existing, imagined state or place, in which one finds crystallized a vision of the 'good society'. This conceptualization of an ideal societal form can be expressed either in a literary narrative, or in the more rationalistic account of a philosophical treatise. A utopian state is typically located in a more or less inaccessible place, distanced from the reader in place and time. Utopian environments have been situated in outer space, or within a hollow earth, on allegedly remote islands or in a distant past or future. Within this variety of settings, the form of the city has had a continuous appeal as the preferred spatial form.¹⁰²

2. Example

In a little-known utopian text, Edward E. Hale's *Sybaris and Other Homes* (1869), an American adventurer enters a Greek city that has been miraculously preserved in a secretive spot on the Italian coast. The strange city exemplifies a number of interesting urban planning solutions with reference also to lively debates on cities and urbanity in the US at the time. Sybaris is organized as a horizontal utopia; all buildings have only one storey, and "stair-builders ... are forbidden to live in Sybaris by ... fundamental law".¹⁰³ The result is a landscape in which the distinctions between suburb and the centre have been erased, in part made possible by a network of public transport by cable car. The visit to Sybaris is in effect an introduction to a sub-

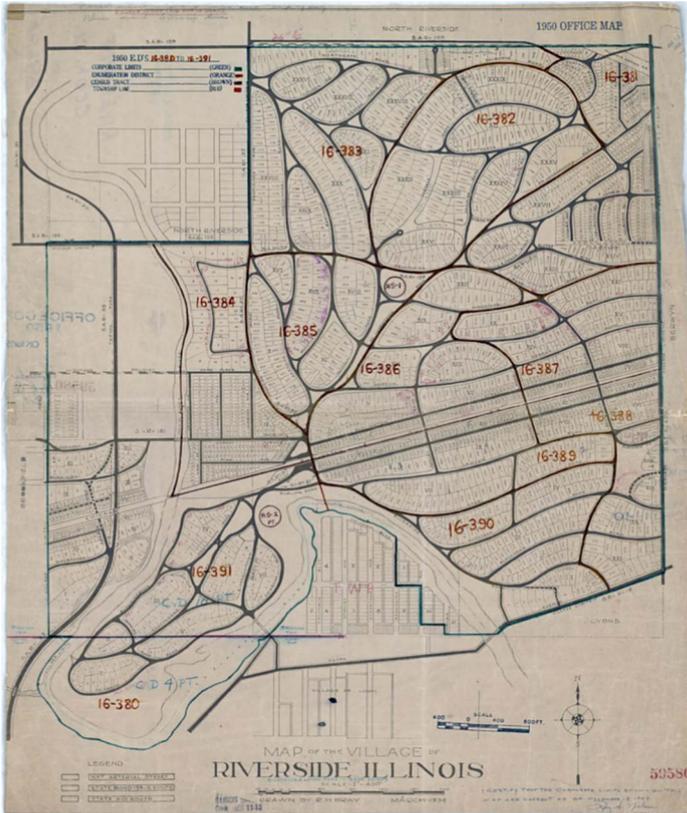
urban dream city, in which “a house without its own garden was an abomination, and easy communication with the suburbs was a necessity.”¹⁰⁴ The meaning of this utopian text stems in large part from its comparison with the bleak working-class living conditions in contemporary Boston, which feature in a separate short story in the book.

3. Explanation

Ideas of the ideal society and the ideal city have always informed urban planning and policy, from Plato's *Republic* (4th century BC) to Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888). But utopian thinking has become increasingly suspect in the course of the twentieth century, in literature, planning and policy. *Looking Backward* has been read as “a sinister blueprint of tyranny”¹⁰⁵ and Plato's *Republic* as “the prototype of the fascist state”.¹⁰⁶ The negative associations of utopia are primarily related to its characteristics of being fixed and essentially authoritarian. Utopia is the envisioning of an ideal state, and tends to project a fixed and final end-state of things, the very opposite of the real city which is never complete or finished.

Any planner working with utopia today runs the risk of being called naïve, or may be suspected of hiding dark aims when proposing a form of utopia as solution to urban challenges. And yet projects such as the King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (evoked in Dave Eggers' *A Hologram for a King*, 2012); *Torontopia*, a distinctively utopian vision of future Toronto, or the island Utopia in Dutch city Almere – an artificial island in an artificial lake on an artificial island in an artificial lake, and one of the sites to host the 2022 Floriade World Exhibition – shows that utopian naming and utopian visionary practices have not run out of steam regardless of claims that we are living in post-utopian times.

Fig. 18: Frederick Law Olmsted's curvilinear vision (1869) for Riverside, Illinois, visible here on a 1950 census map. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1950_Census_Enumeration_District_Maps_-_Illinois_\(IL\)_-_Cook_County_-_Riverside_-_ED_16-380_to_391_-_NARA_-_12013499.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1950_Census_Enumeration_District_Maps_-_Illinois_(IL)_-_Cook_County_-_Riverside_-_ED_16-380_to_391_-_NARA_-_12013499.jpg)

In the case of Hale's account of Sybaris, this was a text that provided an indirect influence for Frederick Law Olmsted's plans for Riverside, Illinois, planned in the late 1860s and one of the early examples of American suburban city planning. Riverside was the

“best-known curvilinear suburb of the nineteenth century”, and its plan contains an abundance of pastorally curving streets.¹⁰⁷ Olmsted and Hale corresponded with each other after Olmsted had read *Sybaris and Other Homes*, and when Hale visited Riverside, he “there found his *Sybaris* fully realised”.¹⁰⁸ Riverside was not an unequivocal success: inhabitants found it extremely difficult to orient themselves in the curving, disorienting streets (see fig. 18). In more general terms, the drive for suburbanization led to the new urban problems of sprawl, inner city decay, car-dependency and unsustainable practices.

4. Applications

What utopia can still bring to planning is not authoritarian illusions of the good city in its definitive form. But utopia can bring a sense of “necessary dreaming” to planning.¹⁰⁹ Important for thinking about the value of utopia in twenty-first century planning is the realization that literary utopia is never only about an idealized future, but always entails a critical view of the present. Utopia invites its audience to look with regret or at least a distinct lack of satisfaction to present flaws in urban design. Its focus is not necessarily on a perfect end-state, but on the imperfection of the present city, and the imperative to try to do better, whether it is in tackling questions of equity, just housing, sustainability, inclusion, or access to public space.

For a planner aiming to work with utopia, starting out from some of the key features of literary utopia may be one way to proceed: to think of a plan’s accompanying text, or a future scenario, in terms of a narrative that features a main character who is introduced into a strange environment by a knowledgeable local guide. As the guide explains to the newcomer the secrets of this idealized city and society, the newcomer looks with new eyes to their home society, and the reader with them. The form of didactic dialogue typical of utopian narratives may in fact be particularly well suited to planning texts.

A focus on fixed and immovable end-states (characteristic of utopias) may lead to future visions of the city as being read as dystopias: as imagined perversions of an ideal state, against which

the main character (or the reader) is set to rebel or from which they want to escape. One way to address this possible outcome is to think of a plan and accompanying texts not as imagined end-points but as the stepping stones for future rounds of planning and deliberation. One of the challenges of planning is to balance the tendency of planning towards idealized, closed views of the future city, and the need to allow for open-endedness, uncertainty, and flexibility.

Related entries: Ambiguity, Genre, Scenario

Further Reading

- Ameel, Lieven. "Cities Utopian, Dystopian and Apocalyptic." *Palgrave Handbook of Literature and the City*. Ed. Jeremy Tambling. London: Palgrave, 2016. 785–800.
- Kumar, Krishan. "The Ends of Utopia." *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (2010): 549–569.
- Pinder, David. *Visions of the City: Utopianism, Power and Politics in Twentieth-Century Urbanism*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Wilson, Elizabeth. *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women*. London: Virago, 1991.

