Utopian Urbanism in the Anthropocene

Ben Small + Gabby Henrie, BAs (almost)
Thaddeus Miller, PhD
Yonn Dierwechter, PhD
Welcome to Nowhere

- Utopia from the Greek *ou* for “not” and *topos* for “place.”

- Eutopia, a homophone in English from the Greek *eu* for “good.”

Odysseus and the Lotus Eaters, Wikipedia
Concrete utopias in the anthropocene

- Cities: utopias or dystopias?
- From the mind, through tangible designs and policies, to the physical plane.
- Anthropocene: concept of the world as fundamentally shaped by humans.
Utopian Urbanism in the Anthropocene

Ben Small + Gabby Henrie
Thaddeus Miller, PhD
Yonn Dierwechter, PhD
I. A brief history of utopian urbanism

1. City Beautiful & Progressive era utopias
2. High modernist urbanism
3. Urban Renewal: Backlash against utopia
4. Neoliberal/post-utopian cities
5. New directions?
19th century cities

Rapid industrialization and urbanization → increasing congestion, chaos, and social conflict in cities

← Chicago in the late 1800s
City Beautiful & Progressive Era Utopias

- ~1890s-1910s
- Grand, stately, neoclassical architecture
- Meant instill civic virtue (lots of libraries, museums, city halls)

1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago
City Beautiful, cont.

Burnham’s 1901 plan for Washington DC

Old Penn Station, NYC
The Modernist Urban Utopia

- Great faith in Progress
- Technological utopianism: better living through innovation and design
- High density, linear, efficient, rationalization of space

Le Corbu’s 1922 “Contemporary City”
“....only architecture and city planning can provide the exact prescription for [society’s] ills...The house that can be built for the modern man (and the city too), a magnificently disciplined machine, can bring back the liberty of the individual—at present crushed out of existence—to each and every member of society.”

-Le Corbusier
Backlash against Urban Renewal

Slum clearance, Chicago

1973 protest against slum clearance in NE Portland to make way for Emanuel Hospital.
1989: The end of utopia?

- Conflation of 20th century utopianism and totalitarianism
  - Russell Jacoby (2005) calls this a “false conflation”
- Fall of Berlin Wall
Cities after the “death” of utopia

(Right) Frank Gehry’s 1984 hollywood public library—which Mike Davis calls “the most menacing library ever built” →

Fortress architecture in pioneer square?
The Mall of America: a “degenerate utopia”?
Toward new utopias?

New Urbanist town plan

Rendering of Masdar Eco-city, Abu Dhabi
III. The Anthropocene: Revisited

- Change in Earth systems resulting from human behavior such as fossil fuel consumption.

- Impacts range from climate change to resource scarcity and social conflict.
Unprecedented Challenges + Solutions

- Unprecedented challenges require unprecedented (read: radical, normative) solutions.

- Saliency of urban focus, yet there is no silver bullet.

- Utopianism is about the ability to look beyond what *is* (current material/ideological paradigm) and envision a fundamentally different and better future.
Utopian Urbanism in the Anthropocene

- "Utopia has been discredited, it is necessary to rehabilitate it. Utopia is never realized and yet it is indispensable to stimulate change" - Henri Lefebvre (1991)

- Utopian Urbanism as response to Dystopian Anthropocene.
Discussion Questions

- What should inform urbanism in the Anthropocene? (What should the priorities of urban planning in the Anthropocene be?)

- Is utopian urbanism in the anthropocene a legitimate hope for progress or merely a method for survival?

- How might the cities of today be adapted to become more resilient to the pressures of the Anthropocene? What current trends in urbanism should be (dis)continued?

- How might urban planning become a more inclusive process informed by community sourced concerns and visions for urban change?
Part I:

1. "Chicago in the Late 1800s": http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft4779n9pn;chunk.id=d0e1245;doc.view=print
2. "Burnham's 1901 plan for Washington DC": http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7C/McMillan_Plan.jpg
3. "Old Penn Station": http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pennsylvania_Station_(1910%E2%80%931963)
5. "Le Corbu's 1922 Contemporary City": https://c1.staticflickr.com/5/4109/5015467532_c6eb93fba52e_z.jpg
12. "Masdar City": http://www.fosterandpartners.com/media/Projects/1515/Img0.jpg