# Utopia as a Method for the Critical Examination of Space

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ABSTRACT For centuries, utopias have proved themselves an effective and critical tool for addressing our socio-spatial context through offering innovative and creative ideas. Often triggering a holistic and integrated reflection and discussion about numerous aspects of our lives and environments, they allowed us to address a multitude of conditions we face on both the local and global scale. To truly employ utopia as a critical method in the contemporary context we must, however, acknowledge that the time of totalizing utopian narratives is behind us. Within the last century, utopia as a form has undergone significant changes, transitioning from a totalizing image of a complete and perfected world to an entire range of micro-utopias, each equipped with addressing a specific aspect of our socio-spatial environments. Reflecting on some of the critical, speculative, and narrative methods identified in utopias of the 20th century, the paper explores the potential of employing utopia as a critical method for thinking about the space around us, and acting in it holistically and systemically. The paper situates utopia as a method not only within the context of contemporary architectural and urban practice, but – more importantly – in the context of spatial education, where it can encourage long-term spatial change. Addressing several contemporary examples of the use of utopia as a critical method and tool in spatial education, and through presenting two innovative approaches from my own educational practice, the paper identifies the importance of utopia as a method of creative and critical thinking in today's context of ongoing crises.

*Key words:* utopia, spatial education, speculative projects, critical thinking.

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## Introduction – Relevance of Utopia

The times we live in, as well as our preceding decades, are marked by continuing and growing crises evident throughout all layers of our environments. Working as a spatial practitioner therefore poses significant challenges, especially when addressing large-scale systems. Making evident, and more importantly - working with – the intricate and interconnected spatial, societal, political, economic and other forms that we are embedded in, requires not only a layered understanding of one's surroundings, but a set of tools and methods which allow us to assess and understand these conditions and propose ways to address, develop (or re-develop) them for the future.

One such method which allows not only spatial practitioners but also other creative disciplines to productively address problematic conditions and contexts is utopia. Utopia is seen in the context of this paper[1] not as a blueprint for an ideal imaginary society, but as a method for critically engaging with our past, present, and future. As Ruth Levitas states, utopia should at the same time be "a provisional hypothesis about how society might be, offered as part of a dialogue, neither intending nor constituting a forecast", and an invitation for "both writer and reader to imagine themselves, as well as the world, otherwise" (Levitas, 2013:18). By promoting "holistic thinking about the connections between economic, social, existential and ecological processes in an integrated way" (Levitas, 2013:18), it allows not only readers and literary writers, but also spatial practitioners to imagine new forms and systems for our environments, triggering through these imaginings a productive discourse about our collective futures.

Often appearing in times of crises or radical change (i.e. periods of industrial or technological revolutions or innovations, political turmoil or wars, new paradigms), utopias often address the potentials and effects these developing conditions could have on the status quo[2]. Produced in dialogue with these changes, they propose modifications to different social and spatial forms (Čulek, 2020) of their historical contexts. By employing imagination to speculatively change the world around them, they create contrasting images to that of their historical society and built environment. Given that we

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[1] The paper and the related definition and reading of utopia relates to a larger research, namely doctoral research – J. Čulek, *Utopia as Critical Method: A Comparative Analysis of Six Architectural and Literary Utopias* (TU Delft: 2023), as well as an ongoing postdoctoral research - J. Čulek, EDUTOPIA - *Utopia as Educational Practice in Architecture: New Methods for Envisioning Transformational Change* (Zagreb: 2025 -)

[2] Some more known architectural and urban planning examples include E. Howard's *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898) which deals with the effects of industrialization, large-scale migration to cities, and the consequent growing economic gap between social classes paired with deteriorating living conditions for the working class, or L. Hilberseimer's *Grosstadt Architektur* (1928) that proposes a new urban model testing the industrialized mode of mass production on the scale of the city and its inhabitants; or more critically positioned ones such as Superstudio's *12 Ideal Cities* (1972), which radicalize modernist post-war urban planning approaches and growing consumerism through dystopian narratives.

are again situated in a period of continuous and increasing turmoil, crisis, invention, and change, the question arises if we should once again look to utopias as a method for triggering a critical and imaginative discourse about potential futures yet to come?

The relevance of utopia as a critical method in spatial practice in undeniable – especially due to its inherent correlation to the fields of architecture and urban planning. Today, the importance of architecture as a discipline is increasingly recognized in terms of its overall impact on the (built) environment. It has been recognized in numerous European and global policy documents[3] as a field exerting a significant effect on our environment, and one which can – in the years to come – either continue to be complicit in the climate crisis or lead in efforts to mitigate it. But even though architecture as a discipline has slowly begun to address and revise its longstanding processes and methods with the aim of improving the overall spatial, societal, and ecological condition, the steps currently taken have mainly focused on changes within construction practice. Some of the main goals included the adaptation and reuse of existing buildings and materials, a focus on the reduction of energy consumption, as well as the design of "smart" buildings and cities that integrate innovative technologies with the aim of optimization. And while these goals are noteworthy, they only employ the engineering aspects of architecture, neglecting its more experimental, discursive, artistic, and transdisciplinary sides, as well as its potential for spatial and societal visioning through imagining new futures for our (built) environment and its inhabitants – human and other.

This paper argues that it is these conceptual and imaginative – utopian – aspects of architecture as a spatial discipline that should be developed – not only through spatial practice but, more importantly, through spatial education. We need to consider utopia not only as a method for critically addressing our (built) environment, but also a discursive tool that teaches a new generation of spatial practitioners novel and comprehensive ways of working within today's complex conditions. Louis Marin defines utopia as a discourse "centred on the imaginary", stating that "fiction, fable-construction, 'anthropomorphized' narratives, 'concrete' descriptions, exotic, novel, and pictorial representation […] are all of its nature" (Marin, 1984:8). And it is these discursive tools and models inherent to utopia that are its most productive assets, especially when it comes spatial education. Focusing on its didactic potential, this paper investigates and compares examples of the use of utopia as a method for critical reflection and speculation in educational practice. After defining utopia as a critical method, the paper brings forth two innovative approaches from my own educational practice which have been developed in two distinct settings – one being the graduate program of an architectural school, and the other an interdisciplinary post-graduate program

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[3] Some examples include the UN Sustainable Development Goals: "Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure", "Sustainable Cities and Communities", UN Report "The Closing Window", New European Bauhaus, HERA's *EU Research Agenda for the Environment, Climate & Health* 2021-2030

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focused on working with complex urban conditions. Through these examples, the paper evaluates the importance and applicability of utopia as a critical method for the "imaginary reconstitution of society" (Levitas, 2013) – an analytical and projective tool for exploring our present and devising potential futures – not only in practice, but also in education.

## Utopia as a Critical Method

Utopia as a concept first appears in literature, more specifically through the eponymous book written by Thomas More in 1516. In it, More writes about the island of Utopia and its spatial, political, and societal arrangements through describing how its numerous social and spatial forms differ from those of his respective historical context – situating it thus firmly in relation with his own present reality. Following its literary origins, utopia as a creative form has since been adopted by many other fields including architecture, film, graphic novels, and others, through which its original text-based format also began to adopt new visual methods of representation. Combining both text and image, the utopias created within the last century have put forward some of the most innovative and radical ideas for addressing an array of conditions of our societies and built environments.

It is important to note, however, when examining utopia as a method instead of a blueprint, that the intention of these ideas is not one of direct or future implementation. It is one of triggering discourse. Marin defines utopia through the concept of *neutral* – which he differentiates from *neutrality* and links it rather to the "span between true and false", a "third term, but a supplementary term, not synthetic" (Marin, 1984:7). He states that within this position, utopia can open "within discourse a space discourse cannot receive", tying itself "to fiction and questioning but not the imaginary, the doubtful, or the possible" (Marin, 1984:7). Marin's concept of the neutral can also be linked to the notion of *plausibility* discussed by Gregory Claeys. Similarly to Marin, he positions utopia within the span of the possible and the impossible, stating that it is "ultimately defined by the limits of humanity itself" (Claeys, 2020:18). Differentiating it from science fiction – a genre for which he states plausibility is not a necessary criterion – he states that:

> *"Neither can utopia be reduced to a psychological impulse, dream, fantasy, projection, desire or wish, though these may underpin its creation or discovery. Nor does utopia mean the search for the 'perfect' life, though it is still frequently confused with this; 'perfection' is essentially a theological concept, which, while historically linked to utopianism, defines a state that is impossible for mortals to attain in this life."* (Claeys, 2020: 16)

Therefore, when observing utopian production of the recent centuries, it is necessary to understand that even though many of the ideas utopias propose are – by design – unrealizable and unrealistic – especially within short timeframes, their realization was never actually the goal. Instead, they were designed as triggers for critically questioning the *status quo* and initiating long-term change. Addressing a wide array of social and spatial changes and implications, utopias have proposed revisions and innovations for our past and present woven into fictional narratives that played out their potential outcomes and repercussions. Combining both alternative forms and a narrative sequence which played out their implementation within a specific space and/or society, utopias present themselves as an extremely valuable and productive tool for operating within today's complex and multi-crisis environment.

If we look specifically to utopian production within the fields of architecture and urbanism, a question often arises if architectural and urban design projects are inherently utopian? Assuming that each project is envisioned with an intention of improving the conditions that it encounters "on site", it is necessary to address the complex relationship between architecture and utopia. If we consider Marin's statement that "utopia is space organized as text and discourse constructed as space" (Marin, 1984:10), a conclusion could be drawn that utopia is innately architectural. But is the reverse also possible – can all architectural projects, regardless of their scale and social or political engagement, be considered utopian?

Shifting focus to the utopian strive of the architectural discipline, Nathaniel Coleman relates utopia to the intrinsic drive within architecture rather than its physical manifestations. He states that both utopia and architecture are "the result of a belief that what could be, or ought to be is superior to what is" (Coleman, 2005:24), providing thus a connection between the utopian literary fiction and architecture, and further elaborating that "as a literary form, fiction presents plausible unreality" while "architectural designs, like fictions" have a similar task of "making of an imaginary realm" (Coleman, 2005:46). Nevertheless, he explains that "architecture is profoundest when an architect's invention advances a commentary on the social activities it will house, as they are lived, and as they might be lived", positioning thus architecture "between conservation of what is and proposition of improved future conditions" (Coleman, 2005:46). This correlation of the present and a possible future positions architecture as a discipline very close to utopia that, according to Coleman, also has the role of imagining "improved conditions intended to replace existing ones", concerning itself "as much with the past and present as with the future" (Coleman, 2005:27). Consequently, he defines utopia in architecture through several key components:

> *"…social and political content; a significant level of detail in the description of what is proposed; elaboration of a positive transformation of social and political life as key to what is proposed or constructed; and, not least – ethical and aesthetical – critique of the present informed by a critical historical perspective."* (Coleman, 2014:8)

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Observing the larger scale of the architectural discipline – urbanism – which deals with the design of cities and its parts, we can acknowledge a strong connection to utopian production. It is in fact the project of the ideal city – an urban plan often designed on the principles of geometry where perfect spatial order aims to produce a perfect society – which is often brought into comparison with utopia. However, as Ruth Eaton points out, there is a clear differentiation between the project of an ideal city and the utopian one. While both forms consist of a perfected physical model of an ideal space and a corresponding social and political ordering of its inhabitants (Eaton, 2002:11), the modes of living they propose are not always critically positioned towards their respective historical context. She identifies two types: (1) the *reactive* city – "where the city is adjusted to reflect an established social order" (Eaton, 2002:11) and strengthen the political ideals of the system in power; and (2) the *proactive* city – one which proposes a new type of social and spatial order and can therefore be considered utopian (Eaton, 2002:11). It is within this innovation and intent for a more comprehensive change – in the critical counterproposal setting itself apart from the established methods of spatial production – that a utopian project differentiates itself from a "typical" architectural one. Returning to Coleman's definition, it is also evident that utopia as a method in architecture is also not really related to architecture's physical form(s), but rather that the essence lies precisely in the intents and methods behind each project, and the overall effects it aims to produce on its wider social and spatial environment. Utopian architecture and urbanism are therefore not about architecture and urbanism at all – they are about the effects that the spatial forms envisioned by the discipline can have on all other social and spatial forms, and about the interplays triggered between them.

### *Assignment 1: Transdisciplinary Encounters – Architecture and Literature*

In the context of architecture, a method which allows one to set apart a utopian project from a standard one is a more detailed development of its narrative. The elaboration of narrative allows for one's focus to widen from the architectural form to its wider spatial and societal impact, simultaneously allowing for a critical review of all scales and elements of the context within which the project is situated. It is through narration and storytelling, that architecture manages to introduce greater social and political relevance into its projects and elaborate aspects that are not exclusively tied to its formal expression. Lee et al. propose that storytelling as a method has "dual structure of 'content' and 'expression'", which is "understood as a 'story'" (Lee et al., 2023:3). In other words, both *what* is conveyed, and *how* it is conveyed plays a role in our understanding of a proposed narrative or future vision. They also elaborate on this by adding a third aspect relevant in storytelling – namely "reflection (interaction with others)" (Lee et al., 2023:3) – which can in the case of utopian projects be seen as the discursive element that allows for the *status quo* to be brought into question. Although storytelling as a design method is increasingly used in various architecture

schools worldwide, it is most often not used as an integrated method for developing the entire project, but rather as a method of representation. In other words, storytelling is only used as a method of summarizing the research process that preceded the development of the project, or as a way of justifying certain design decisions. But even in this limited way of use, storytelling has benefits for students, including the development and improvement of their "creativity and communication skills", allowing them to "develop unique design approaches and methods in a coherent manner" and improve "decision-making and problem-solving ability through performing self-reflective activities" (Lee et al., 2023:2). Storytelling as a method encourages students to put emphasis on "spatial sequences and spatial experience rather than form-oriented architecture" (Lee et al., 2023:2). In other words, the use of storytelling as a method brings with it several benefits, such as the possibility of conceptualizing complex systems of ideas, introducing and addressing topics from other disciplines, and a better situatedness and critical reflection integrated into the project itself.

Focusing on activating and developing this narrative-based approach to design and project development, the design studio "Transdisciplinary Encounters[4] – Architecture and Literature" relied on employing methods and approaches from another creative field – literature. The design studio was held in the spring of 2021 at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment at TU Delft. It was held and developed by myself and prof.dr.ir. Klaske Havik, and included students of the second semester of the master program. The outcome of the studio was focused on the use and translation of various literary methods into architectural practice. This was achieved through a detailed analysis of selected literary works[5] that served both as inspiration and methodological case studies for the later development of architectural projects. The students were "invited to explore, examine and discover the intricate connections between architecture and literature, and the potential of literary methods to address such topics as architectural experience, use and imagination" (Havik, Čulek, 2021:6). Employing storytelling and imagination as the main methods of the design studio, the students were asked to construct their own architectural task through the process of studying literary methods on three different scales. The goal of the studio was to produce a spatial intervention based on and developed through the learned and researched methods. The outcome was thus not predefined, but rather open-ended and strongly dependent on the works, themes, and methods that the students decided to explore.

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[4] "Transdisciplinary Encounters" is conceived as a design studio that changes every year, in both the topic and the teaching staff. Depending on the themes and disciplines it deals with, it aims to at create a transdisciplinary interaction between architecture and other artistic, technical, and humanities fields.
[5] *100 Years of Solitude* (1967) by G. G. Márquez, *Life: A User's Manual* (1978) by G. Perec, and *The House of Leaves* (2000) by M. Danielewski; *We* (1921) by Y. Zamyatin; *The Wall* (2019) by J. Lanchester.

The design studio was structured into three main segments that differed in terms of research and design methods, as well as the spatial scales that they operated in. Instead of following a traditional architectural approach in which the first step would usually involve the analysis of a wider context and the larger scale, the students began their design process narratively, by looking at the small scale of a human (or other) inhabitant, whose surroundings were then gradually expanded together with the scale of the project itself. Since the studio widened its focus from the formal and functional aspects of the architectural designs to the individual and group experiences as well as its spatial impact on the imagined users, the scales in which the students worked were also not defined only through their formal aspects, but also through their social impact. The small scale (1:10) thus focused on individuals and their immediate surroundings such as a house or apartment, the medium scale (1:100) observed social communities, groups, and other types of political, social, cultural and interest organizations together with the spaces they inhabit, while the large scale (1:1000) focused on larger and heterogeneous populations such as cities, countries, or even the global scale, together with their spatial equivalents (Čulek, 2022:218). Working with different scales and tracking their correlations allows students to understand how the identified and developed social and spatial forms were connected, and how they overlapped.

As an outcome for each of the three segments of the studio, the students were asked to produce visual and textual material that represented the elaboration of their research and the steps towards identifying and developing their architectural task. The text was conceived not only as a description of the accompanying visual elements, but as an "integrative part of the design process", which was intended to "complement and add to the visual material" (Havik, Čulek, 2021:12), and encouraged students to explore the potential of writing and storytelling as a "design tool which can be used together with traditional architectural methods" (Havik, Čulek, 2021:12). "Transdisciplinary Encounters" therefore reversed the established process of the design studio, which usually begins with a predefined project brief, location, and scale, followed by a process of analysis and design moving from the "larger" towards the "smaller" – all with the aim of creating a new way of approaching architectural assignments. The studio also addressed a very relevant and common design condition, namely a complete lack of a predefined problem. Examining the specific ways in which creative disciplines approach problem tasks, Nigel Cross states that one of the main outcomes of design and/or spatial education should be the ability to "define, redefine and change the problem given in light of the solution that emerges from his mind and hand" (Cross, 1982:224). With its open format and emphasis on the development of a methodological approach, the studio therefore aimed to develop a speculative and critical view of one's own wider spatial context through the identification of both the problem and its possible solution.

If we additionally examine the literary – especially the utopian – aspect of this design studio, we see that the scope or the context of the "problem" is also wider than its standard architectural understanding, including not only spatial aspects, but also dealing with numerous social issues. Returning to Levitas' view of utopia as a method for the "imaginary reconstitution of society" (Levitas, 2013), we understand that the common misconception of utopia as merely a fictional literary form is lacking, and that its application and its potential fields of action can be expanded. E. Van Dermijnsbrugee i S. Chatelier (2022) build on Levitas' work through the analysis of architectural education, positioning the imaginary aspect of utopia as a crucial one in "enabling utopian work to function as a creative resistance to the neoliberal blueprint" (Dermijnsbrugee , Chatelier, 2022:12), referring thus also to Levitas' conclusion that the "imagining [of] alternatives helps to counter conformity by contradicting the taken-for-granted character with the real" (Levitas, 2013:139). Utopia as a creative form that bases itself equally on storytelling and design allows us to address a much wider array of topics by embedding the built forms with narratives about the lives and processes that take place within and around them. They integrate narratives of worlds situated in a time and space different from our own and have throughout history focused on addressing some of the most prominent social and spatial issues. While employing utopia's critical approach together with its creative methods in a project would previously only have dealt with developing space, we can aim to produce a wider range of productive outcomes that consider both the societal and temporal aspects of the built space.

Perhaps two of the most interesting, yet radically different examples which were produced within the "Transdisciplinary Encounters" studio, both addressing a wider scale of social and spatial topics developed into coherent narratives, are the projects "Remember Tropicana" by Lucie Castillo-Ros, and "House of Light" by Diana Della Pietra.

"Remember Tropicana" dealt with a specific location in Rotterdam – the abandoned Tropicana swimming pool complex on the Maas River – awaiting its renovation. Basing her project on the analysis of Perec's *Life: A User Manual*, which Castillo-Ros identified as a series of "puzzle pieces" that together formed a larger story, stating that "the lack of a clear narrative line throughout [the book] creates a puzzle effect", and therefore outlined it as an "unfinished project" (Castillo-Ros, 2021:3). Identifying that Perec uses a "show and don't tell approach", through which he is "suggesting stories without giving any specific actions to fill [them] in" (Castillo-Ros, 2021:3), she decided to apply a similar approach to her project by creating a series of seemingly unrelated stories. Using a three-partite narrative as her main method, Castillo-Ros developed a three-stories set in the past, present and future of Tropicana, respectively, each with the help of a separate character. By linking both the reading and the ambitions of the project to the values, attitudes, spatial experience, and needs of each

character, she questioned possible approaches to the Tropicana on different scales and with different intensities of interventions, offering a much wider spectrum of speculative possibilities.

Due to the studio's open and flexible approach, the example of "House of Light" by Della Pietra is expectedly quite different from the Tropicana example – both in its scale and in the approaches it employs. Based on Danielewski's novel *The House of Leaves*, the project takes as its fundamental inspiration the differences in spatial perception and experiences from residents of an imaginary house. Della Pietra states that Danielewski's *House of Leaves* "brings about the question of subjectivity and transience in architectural perception" (Della Pietra, 2021:10). She states that due to the "constantly changing geometry and size" of the house within the narrative, "one can only imagine 'tours' […] but never 'maps'" (Della Pietra, 2021:10). This reading led her to conclude that the result of this narrative approach is one of a "fragmented and transformative space", due to which it is "impossible to capture the house in its totality" (Della Pietra, 2021:10). In her project, "House of Light", Della Pietra "employs the literary technique of the estrangement to spur a critical reflection on the duality between physical and virtual reality" (Della Pietra, 2021:22). As one of the more utopian results coming out of the design studio, the project begins with an imagined context in which all residents have permanently lost their sight due to excessive exposure to screens. As a critique of today's society extremely oriented towards the continuous use of screens through which we consume an innumerable amount of content, Della Pietra creates a world in which a modified version of that same screen becomes the only way of social and spatial interaction. As an antidote to the condition of extreme isolation in which people perform all functions virtually, without ever achieving actual physical contact, she creates the "House of Light" – an interactive virtual space that teaches people to reactivate their senses and feelings, thus improving their overall mental and physical condition.

### Assignment 2: Utopia as a Critical Method – Campus 2123

Building on the findings from the "Transdisciplinary Encounters" design studio, the second developed assignment focused more precisely on utopia as a critical method in education, working with narrative as a potential method for observing and addressing complex spatial systems. A two-day workshop titled "Utopia as a Critical Method", which I developed and led, took place in 2023 and was held as part of the second semester of the interdisciplinary post-graduate specialist study program Urban Studies at the University of Rijeka. The group was interdisciplinary, both in terms of educational background as well as current professional activity, and ranged from architects, urban planners and other spatial practitioners to individuals working in other fields.

In the context of the workshop, utopia was defined not only as a creative and fictional project or narrative, but also as a form which should be firmly situated in its socio-spatial context. By positioning utopia as a critical method[6] and not as a totalizing plan, it ceases to be perceived as a final product or desired outcome and becomes a tool for thinking about space with the aim of critically reflecting on the present through the elaboration of an alternative speculative future. The aim of the workshop was to examine and critically reflect upon a given context through its existing social and spatial forms (Čulek, 2023:9). This was achieved by designing and testing a speculative narrative which the students developed in groups based on the context of the Rijeka University Campus.

During the workshop, students were divided into two groups – each addressing the Campus from a different predetermined perspective. While one group examined it through the lens of "minimum" or lacking, the other group dealt with the topic of "maximum" or abundance and excess. The social and/or spatial forms which were intended to reach their "minimum" or "maximum" were not predefined but rather emerged from the students' analysis of the context and the speculative elaboration of the acquired knowledge. The process of developing a narrative based on the reduction or expansion of a certain social or spatial form builds on Frederic Jameson's concept of "world reduction" (Jameson, 2005). Through it he refers to a specific way in which a utopian world is imagined through the reduction of the author's historical context and reality. Although Jameson associates this method specifically with the work of Ursula K. Le Guin, it can also be observed in several other architectural and literary utopias[7]. He identifies world reduction as one of three methods for experimentation within science fiction, alongside "analogy" and "extrapolation" (Jameson, 2005:271), and defines it as a method that is "based on a principle of systematic exclusion […] of empirical reality" within which reality itself is "deliberately thinned and weeded out through an operation of radical abstraction and simplification" (Jameson, 2005:271). The workshop assignment and intended outcomes are also comparable to the example I. Shor's lays out in "Learning how to Learn: Conceptual Teaching in a Course Called

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**6** The developed educational method builds on the research that utopia – as a creative literary and/or architectural form has changed within the last century and moved away from producing totalizing visions of future worlds towards becoming a more fragmented yet critical form of addressing aspects of our environment through imagining its alternatives. These changes which have occurred to utopia as a creative form can be viewed through M. Foucault's concept of *heterotopia*, C. Jencks' related concept of the *heteropolis*, and are also addressed by D. Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990), relating specifically the production of postmodern fiction to the overall fragmentation of society. See Čulek, J., "(Re)Defining Utopia – The Changing Concept of an Ideal World", *critic|all – V International Conference on Architecture*, Design & Criticism, ed. R. Cavallo, S. Colmenares, S. M. Blas, G. Martin, E. Martinez-Milana, N. Mota, critic|all Press, 2023

**7** i.e. The work of Italian architectural group Superstudio, specifically their *12 Ideal Cities* (1972) project, in which each of the twelve narratives focuses on developing and radicalizing of one or several urban planning approaches of the time, developing them as the only force that shapes the built environment and its inhabitants.

'Utopia'" (1977) where, through several progressive exercise held with students, he sets out to creatively and critically develop their conceptual thinking. Through a three-part assignment he asked the students to (1) choose a known object or concept and describe it in detail, to (2) diagnose it through a series of questions such as "how did it get here? Who benefits from it? What are the social consequences of it? What did it replace, if anything? What are its best and worst features? Can we do without it?" (Shor, 1977:640). Consequently, he assigned the students to reconstruct the object or concept and through it remove all its negative or problematic aspects (Shor, 1977:640).

In a similar manner, the Urban Studies students were also instructed to identify different social and spatial forms from the environment of Rijeka's University Campus and chose specific ones which they would develop into their "minimum" or "maximum" utopian narratives. To approach the task and structure of the narratives more effectively, the students were also introduced to some of the main overarching themes that utopian texts and projects have delt with throughout the decades. This assisted them in identifying how these topics were manifested in their specific context and how they might have already changed in recent history, which in turn allowed them to speculate on their potential future developments. If we look at examples of utopian projects throughout the twentieth century, focusing precisely on the main topics they address and the social and spatial forms they propose as alternatives to their historical realities, we can elucidate four overarching ones that appear consistently[8].

The most prominent topic identified is that of (A) housing – or the imagination of a new or the radical adaptation of the existing immediate environment for humans and other beings inhabiting the utopian world. The second one is (B) production – which addresses, for instance, the relationship between work and leisure, but also manifests itself through changes in various related spatial and social forms, most prominently through the very position or displacement of spaces, zones and forms of production and industry. The third topic is (C) technology, through which many authors have speculated upon its potential developments, spatial implications, and overall impact on society through analysing both the potentials and threats that technology inherently carries. Although technological possibilities and forms have been increasingly developing throughout the twentieth century, the technological social and spatial forms occurring in utopian works are often several steps ahead of any given reality – making this category perhaps the most speculative and forward-thinking one. The last topic that the students were asked to think about in their projects is that of (D) governance. While the topic itself has mostly been developed only through social forms, addressing different political structures and systems, it also encompasses the topics of distribution and zoning for different processes and functions within the city, which allows it to be discussed through spatial forms as well.

[8] See Čulek, 2023

Developing their speculative projects through one or several of the main utopian topics, the students developed two utopian narratives set at the location of the Rijeka University Campus, one hundred years in the future. The project developed by the first group of students[9] titled "The New Rijeka Archipelago: When the Water Reaches the Throat" dealt with the "problematization of urban isolation, functional monoculture and insufficient density of construction of the existing Campus" (Marasović et al., 2023). Developing the narrative through the perspective of abundance and "maximum", the group assumed two parallel future conditions – a radical rise in the sea level and "the development of the computational power of the existing supercomputer Bura" (Marasović et al., 2023) – to create a utopian island on the location of today's Campus, creating through it the "New Rijeka Archipelago". Employing the narrative not only to elaborate on the project, but also to generate the visual materials through artificial intelligence image generators, they addressed the coexistence of humans and other beings within a limited spatial zone, assuming "a horizontal organization based on equal contribution to the community by all entities it encompasses" (Marasović et al., 2023). Furthermore, by narrating the utopian island itself not only through the viewpoint and experience of its human inhabitants, but also through the perspectives of "a mussel, a stream, a bee, a solar panel, a seagull" (Marasović et al., 2023), and the supercomputer Bura itself, they aimed to raise awareness and indicate the importance of including non-human users in developing the utopian narrative and thinking about our shared futures.

The second group of students[10] developed the notion of scarcity or "minimum", interpreted through the complete cessation of existence of any built educational spaces due to the University's relocation to the "metaverse" (Kliman et al., 2023). Assuming redundancy of retaining ownership of the existing Campus spaces, they proposed two parallel narratives for the future use of the site, both based on the "critique of capitalism that is creeping into every pore of society, including education" (Kliman et al., 2023). Within their narratives, the Campus falls under the ownership of a private investor from the socio-popular sphere, and is left at the discretion, needs, and desires of a financially and politically powerful individual. The first "benevolent dictator" creates a "healing resort available to everyone, at any time, with the idea that natural resources – with an emphasis on the bura wind – have a healing power, and as such return man – burdened by technology – to nature, grounding him both literally and figuratively" (Kliman et al., 2023). The utopian narrative manifests itself spatially through the removal of all built structures and a return to nature, permitting only temporary structures built by the users themselves out of necessity. The second narrative represents a radical opposite where the site is ruled by the "ideology of non-inclusive attitudes" (Kliman et al., 2023). Here, the Campus area is completely developed, with each individual building representing the locus of a closed and non-inclusive

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[9] The group consisted of Ines Marasović, Iva Peručić, Ana-Marija Vašiček, Dorian Vujnović and Mateo Zonta
[10] The group consisted of Ana Kliman, Eva Mlinar, Mirta Stipeč and Arijana Sušanj

"island" of a radical ideological group. By developing two spatially and socially different speculative futures, the students question the potentials, possibilities, and threats of private ownership applied to public space. They pose the question "what kind of future are we creating […] for the entire community, as well as the entire city" (Kliman et al., 2023) when we hand over public land and its use to the management of private capital and their own personal interests.

The examples show that by using narrative methods for addressing and developing new spatial conditions, the students were able to successfully focus on more than just developing architectural and urban solutions aimed at solving spatial and programmatic problems. Using speculation, they also managed to propose different methods for inhabiting and developing spaces based on the impetus of diverse individuals and groups and their interests. By adopting a creative and analytical approach in which the development of the assigned context was observed (fictionally) over a longer period of time, through addressing different scales, focusing on some of the main topics addressed by utopian works, and taking into account the various aspects of (non)human action and habitation, the students were able to address a wide range of social and political topics such as inclusivity, climate crisis, education, and ownership through developing concrete spatial interventions and experiments.

## Conclusion

The use of utopia as a critical method for understanding and acting in space—particularly within spatial education—marks a vital step in developing of the conceptual and critical frameworks needed to navigate today's complex and ever-shifting environments. While the application of utopian methods in education is still evolving, with varied outcomes and emphases, the two innovative examples of design assignments presented in this paper demonstrate a possible way of how creative tools and methodologies inspired by utopian literary and architectural practices can be powerfully translated into pedagogical and spatial contexts. Within the two examples, the utopian methods were employed to support both the construction of new narratives about near or distant futures, and the critical examination of present-day spatial and social challenges.

By generating spatial narratives through textual and visual media, a deeper and more nuanced engagement with contemporary issues becomes possible, allowing for the testing and development of potential spatial strategies that could be better suited to the intricacies of contemporary urban life. When utopia is approached not merely as a fictional narrative and an aimed outcome, but as a method of "imaginary reconstitution of society" (Levitas, 2013:139), it enables the design of flexible and complex spatial-social systems that aim to be more resilient in the face of the instability and fragility produced by ongoing crises (Dermijnsbrugge, Chatelier, 2022:17).

Acknowledging the multifaceted, contradictory, and dynamic nature of contemporary society—as well as the critiques of utopia as a "totalizing narrative" (Čulek, 2023:77)—it remains crucial to explore new ways of mobilizing utopian thinking within spatial practice. These approaches offer the potential to generate innovative, holistic, and long-term visions capable of addressing the pressing problems of today and tomorrow through non-standard, transformative solutions. By adopting narrative-based approaches developed alongside with the utopian tradition, architecture and other spatial disciplines can more effectively engage with pressing climatic, cultural, political, economic, and social issues. Although establishing of utopian tools and approaches as legitimate methodologies within spatial disciplines is a long-term endeavor, their integration into educational frameworks is essential. Embedding of these methods in the training of future architects and spatial practitioners is key to ensuring their relevance, legitimacy, and enduring application in an increasingly uncertain world.

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## *Utopija kao metoda kritičkog promišljanja prostora*

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### Sažetak

Utopije su se kroz stoljeća pokazale učinkovitim i kritičkim alatom za rješavanje socio-prostor-nih pitanja današnjice, nudeći pregršt inovativnih i kreativnih ideja. Često potičući holističko i integrirano promišljanje i diskurs o brojnim aspektima naših života i okoline, omogućile su nam da adresiramo različite uvjete s kojima se suočavamo i na lokalnoj i na globalnoj razini. Ali da bismo uistinu koristili utopiju kao kritičku metodu u suvremenom kontekstu, moramo pri-hvatiti činjenicu da je vrijeme totalizirajućih utopijskih narativa gotovo. Kroz proteklo stoljeće, utopija kao oblik prošla je kroz značajne promjene, transformirajući se iz totalizirajuće slike savršenog svijeta u cijeli niz mikroutopija, gdje je svaka fokusirana na rješavanje specifičnog as-pekta naše društveno-prostorne okoline. Nadovezujući se na kritičke, spekulativne i narativne metode identificirane u utopijama 20. stoljeća, tekst istražuje potencijal korištenja utopije kao kritičke metode za promišljanje prostora oko nas te sistemsko i holističko djelovanje u njemu. Rad situira utopiju kao metodu ne samo u kontekst suvremene arhitektonske i urbane prakse, već i u kontekst prostornog obrazovanja, gdje ima potencijal potaknuti dugoročne prostorne promjene. Osvrćući se na nekoliko suvremenih primjera korištenja utopije kao kritičke metode i alata u prostornom obrazovanju te kroz predstavljanje dva inovativna pristupa iz vlastite edu-kacijske prakse, rad identificira važnost utopije kao metode kreativnog i kritičkog promišljanja i djelovanja u današnjem kontekstu tekućih kriza.

*Ključne riječi:* utopija, prostorna edukacija, spekulativni projekti, kritičko promišljanje.