

# *futuribles* - no. 414 - September-October 2016

## **The Resurgence of Urban Utopias**

*Jean Haëntjens*

This year marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia*, which gave that term its current meaning and re-connected with a literary genre begun by Plato –the detailed description of a society that is seen by the author as ideal. This utopia of More's, which was highly regarded, particularly in Europe from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, became very influential and in subsequent centuries many authors have tried their hands at utopian proposals, applied in most cases to circumscribed territories. As Jean Haëntjens reminds us, this strain of utopian thought contributed greatly to fuelling the visions of towns and cities deemed desirable by the political actors and urbanists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

After a long period of "utopian silence", which led to an absence of innovative thinking on urban matters in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we have for some years now been seeing a host of urban innovations that are akin, in many respects, to utopian ventures. This is why *Futuribles* has decided to take stock, in this issue, of the complex relations between utopian thinking and urban policies.

Jean Haëntjens opens this dossier by reminding us, first, of the historic collusion between utopians and urbanists, the different periods of utopian thought, and the way urbanists and architects have seized on these utopias to modify the urban landscape. He also shows the developments that have been underway since the 1970s, particularly the emergence of new urban proposals of a utopian or similar nature emanating not from visionary theorists but, increasingly, from associations, communities, enterprises or citizens resolving to take the future of their town or city in hand. It is these initiatives, these new urban utopias that are presented in this issue, with the following question running through the whole enterprise: will they enable us to meet the formidable challenges posed by the accommodation of three billion new urban dwellers by the year 2050?

## **How a Territory Becomes Creative: A Lesson from Venice**

*Arlette and André-Yves Portnoff*

At the margins of this issue devoted to urban utopias, Arlette and André-Yves Portnoff show in this article how a territory can gear itself up for creativity and so place itself at the heart of the socio-economic system of which it is part. They take as examples the city of Venice in its 15<sup>th</sup>- and 16<sup>th</sup>-century glory days, and the actions of an inspired individual, Aldo Manuzio, who seized on the printing technique invented by Gutenberg to publish illustrated books and works of humanist thinking. Arlette and André-Yves Portnoff show how, thanks to this innovation in the dissemination of the written word, Venice, a territory open to the world and to classical learning, underwent an exceptional level of development for Europe at that time. They also remind us how this rise of Venice was stopped in its tracks by censorship and the Inquisition, proof if any were needed of the importance of vision and values in the development of territories and their openness to the world. This is a lesson worth remembering at a time when Europe is facing a resurgence of inward-looking tendencies and obscurantist values.

## **Utopia, Artists and the City**

*Stéphanie Lemoine*

Whereas the earliest utopias and those of the 19<sup>th</sup> century grant only limited scope to art and culture, we have since the late 1960s seen the emergence or re-emergence of genuine artistic utopias that have, in their way, contributed to the evolution of the city. This is shown in this article by Stéphanie Lemoine, which forms part of this special issue on urban utopias. Whether in the form of ephemeral events or the mobilization of "flash mobs" against a counter-cultural or revolutionary political backdrop, urban-artistic utopias are more and more common and increasingly represent alternative propositions capable of fuelling the cultural dimension of urban policies.

### **Urban Utopias and the Construction Industry: The Eiffage Group's "Phosphore" Project**

*Valérie David*

The "Phosphore" project, rolled out by the construction conglomerate Eiffage, provides a good example of the principle of broadening the range of actors involved in urban innovation. Without claiming to offer a blueprint for society, Phosphore nonetheless goes far beyond the ordinary industrial or urban project. It verges on a utopian approach both in its incorporation of the main themes of contemporary utopias—the limit on resources, personal fulfilment, sharing and mobility—and its methods of horizontal management. Valérie David has been running this experimental project since 2007. Here she affords unprecedented insight into the workings of utopian thought in a major construction company.

### **The Darwin Urban Ecosystem: From "Territorial Hacking" to a New Model of Co-producing the City?**

*Jean-Marc Gancille and Philippe Barre*

Jean-Marc Gancille and Philippe Barre give an account here of the urban eco-system they have played a part in developing in Bordeaux on the wasteland left by an abandoned military barracks. After rehearsing the history of their "takeover" of the site, they show how their project fits into a long-term perspective, combining local traders, co-working, culture, leisure activities, an urban farm and other ecological experiments against a background of alternative citizen culture. It is all about another way of seeing and conceiving urban space, and particularly of putting ecological transition into practice, a notion that has been much talked about in France but has struggled to find wide-scale implementation. And, despite the obstructions and resistance that continue, on a regular basis, to hamper this process of urban creation, the site is expanding, activities and employment are growing, and the ecosystem is developing after the fashion of the Darwinian evolution of species: it is adapting and progressing.

### **Utop, an Ongoing Utopian Housing Project in Paris**

*Marthe de La Taille-Rivero*

As Jean Haëntjens stressed in his article at the beginning of this special issue, we have, since the 1970s, seen the emergence of new urban projects, coming not from visionary

theorists but increasingly from associations, collectives, companies or citizens who have decided to take the future of their city in hand. Marthe de La Taille-Rivero outlines one of these initiatives here, the work of a collective of Paris citizens who are carrying out a project in participatory living. She shows how a utopian vision of housing shared between friends is about to become reality, since, after surmounting a series of administrative, financial and technical hurdles, the Utop project has been approved by the Paris city authorities and translated into an architectural project that is both environmentally friendly and mindful of the need to connect with the residents of the area. If everything goes according to plan, the housing complex should be in place in two years' time, lending substance to a new form of urban utopia.

### **Urban Nature, a Paradoxical Utopia**

*Jean-Pierre Lévy and Isabelle Hajek*

Whereas in most countries the issues around sustainable development are well acknowledged at all institutional levels, the question of the place of nature in towns and cities still remains a crucial element to be confronted by those who conceive and craft our urban policies. And yet, as Jean-Pierre Lévy and Isabelle Hajek stress in this article, combining the two terms "nature" and "urban" may seem paradoxical, to say the least—and quite often is so. Is the idea of nature in the city purely utopian then, in the sense that the city might be said by definition to be "anti-nature"? Precisely because of the currently prevalent context of the pursuit of sustainable development, are there not future prospects for urban nature? This is the question Lévy and Hajek analyse here, after first examining the way city-nature relations have been viewed historically; they emphasize the expectations associated with sustainable development and the renewed interest in working out how to reintroduce nature into the urban environment and overcome the paradoxes. Though often idealized and as yet still poorly defined, urban nature remains a dynamic concept which, in its way, also feeds into visions of urban reconfiguration.

### **The Prototype City: Or How the Countries of the South are Reinventing Urbanism**

*Morgan Poulizac*

As the Habitat III international conference to be held at Quito in October 2016 is in prepara-

ration (following the conferences of Vancouver in 1976 and Istanbul in 1996, it will lay down the United Nations road map for urban development over the next twenty years), one thing is clear: solutions for the city of tomorrow are no longer to be sought solely from among the developed countries, but increasingly from the cities of the South. Those cities, with populations that are increasing rapidly and should continue to do so in the coming decades, are offering a new approach to urbanism: namely *prototype urbanism*, an approach that is less theoretical and more experimental. Morgan Poulizac outlines its mechanisms for us here (responding –often urgently– to the social demand with the means that happen to be to hand) and provides various examples from the African, Asian and South American continents.

### **Urban Smartness or Algorithmic Cities? What Scope for New Utopias?**

*Carlos Moreno*

For some years, “smart cities” have aroused a great deal of interest, particularly in a context of renewed concern with towns and cities, which provide the optimal experimental scale when it comes to ecological transition and resilience to climate change. Though there is no unanimously accepted definition, “smart cities” nonetheless have widely recognized characteristics: reconciling economic development, a reduced environmental footprint and improvement of the quality of life of city-dwellers by drawing on available –and, particularly, digital– technologies. Given these objectives, plans for smart cities belonged for a long time to the category of urban utopias. However, with rapid technological advance and a growing awareness of the need for ecological transition, utopia has gradually been caught up by reality.

In this article, Carlos Moreno shows us how urban “smartness” represents a new paradigm for utopian thinking and may offer a real opportunity for our urban areas and their citizens to evolve. He also stresses the importance of not confining ourselves to a focus on the technological dimension and contributing to the emergence of *human* smart cities.

### **Smart Cities, Between Utopia and Experimentation**

*Jean-François Soupizet*

While elsewhere in this dossier Carlos Moreno shows how the “smart city” represents a new paradigm for utopian thought, Jean-François Soupizet goes into detail here on what smart cities actually *are* today. After a historical reminder of the origin of this fashionable concept, he analyses the many –technological, organizational, political etc.– issues inherent in the data worked on by cities and in the so-called “smart” management of that data. He then outlines various ongoing experiments relating to smart cities, before examining a series of questions that are crucial to the thinking about them: are smart cities useful, do they optimize partnerships, do they improve local governance? The future of this new urban model will surely depend on answers to these questions and on the capacity of smart cities to open up to all their stakeholders.

### **Brexit: Is it Done and Dusted?**

*Jean-François Drevet*

On 23 June, 51.9 % of British voters opted for “Brexit”, the UK’s exit from the European Union. Following that vote, Prime Minister David Cameron handed over the premiership to Theresa May, which means that she will be responsible for negotiating the conditions of that exit with her future European ex-partners. It is a negotiation that appears tricky since, as Jean-François Drevet shows in this column, the consequences of Brexit hardly seem likely to turn out very positive for the UK, either economically or in terms of social and regional cohesion. As far as the EU is concerned, the fact of going back down to 27 members and no longer being faced with recurrent obstruction from Britain may offer an opportunity to push for further integration. However, in the current economic context and given current levels of migration, the European institutions have to fully exercise their skills to obtain meaningful results in order to restore trust among Europe’s citizens. The gamble is far from being won... ■

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