In 2008, Austrian architect, theorist, and scholar Günther Feuerstein published a volume titled Urban Fiction: Strolling through Ideal Cities from Antiquity to the Present Day. The book combined visual evidence from historical illustrations and written evidence into a series of playful descriptions of what it might be like to wander through unbuilt places of utopian imagination. By rendering these fictional cities in a fictional fashion, Feuerstein adopted a unique strategy to avoid one of the problems that has long haunted would-be scholars of utopian architecture: how to subject the buildings of literature to formal and historical analyses that are the tools of architectural historians. This problem has encouraged past historians to concentrate on ideal cities that have been visually rendered in some capacity, as with Ruth Eaton’s copiously illustrated Ideal Cities: Utopia and the (Un)Built Environment (2002) and Helen Rosenau’s narrower but more rigorous The Ideal City: Its Architectural Evolution (1972). One of the issues with utopian images, however, is that they often suffer from a lack of fidelity to the texts they are meant to illustrate, perhaps most famously in the case of Thomas More’s germinal Utopia (1516), early editions of which featured a frontispiece depicting conventionalized representations of Renaissance cities bearing almost no likeness to the Utopian towns described in the book. Tessa Morrison attempts to tackle both the methodological problem of formally analyzing written architecture and the analytical problem of reconciling illustrations with texts in her new book, Unbuilt Utopian Cities 1460 to 1900. She does so by creating digital models for ten ideal cities (four from the Renaissance and six from the age of industry), all of which, she argues, are “representative of their time” (5). Like Feuerstein, she synthesizes both visual and textual architectural evidence; unlike Feuerstein, however, Morrison attempts to create visual architecture, which requires her to fill in some of the gaps left by the illustrations and the texts, and, in moments of contradiction between the two, to grant one precedence over the other. This is a challenging project, and the terms of success are never made clear. Scholarship and scholarly art making vie with each other to define the book; neither loses completely, but neither wins.

Unbuilt Utopian Cities began as an experimental survey that Morrison and Mark Rubin conducted in 2014 “to test whether the philosophies that were embedded into [historical utopian] cities are apparent to a modern audience.” The researchers showed a group of undergraduates digital representations of utopian cities and asked for their impressions. The results do not seem to have been particularly revealing, with students from many points on the political spectrum applauding the orderliness of the overall urban forms while generally criticizing the architectural monotony. One of the lessons of these findings may be that it is difficult to extract a specific political philosophy from architecture presented in a contextual vacuum. Morrison and Rubin may have been better served by engaging with the scholarship on the problem of reader response, not least Kenneth M. Roemer’s Utopian Audiences: How Readers Locate Nowhere (2003), but there is no evidence of such scholarly foundation work, either in the survey or in the monograph that Morrison has developed from it.

Happily, the monograph includes discussions of the politics motivating the utopian visions in question. Each chapter is dedicated to a single utopia and is composed in roughly the same manner: historical background on the utopian vision is presented, followed by a summary of the vision’s political philosophy, and finally a description of the architecture and brief explanation of the reconstruction. Many original illustrations are provided, most redrawn by the author (presumably to avoid fees for publication rights). Morrison usually does a good job in covering the background and political philosophy, but the relationships among the different segments—historical context, political philosophy, and the architecture and urbanism itself—are often left unarticulated. This positions the book in some ways as a continuation of the initial experiment, or perhaps as a very rich catalogue for a creative exhibition, in which readers/viewers are equipped with a backstory and then left to wander through the architecture imaginatively on their own. The single-file case study format of the book—not uncommon among works that deal with this topic—facilitates a rewarding in-depth focus on specific visionary and their reasons for proposing utopian reforms, but it also segreates them from one another, obscuring some connections and compelling Morrison to repeat herself when visions have a great deal in common.

A foreword by Michael J. Ostwald and preface and introduction by Morrison set an imperfect stage for what follows, partly because the authors never define their core terms or acknowledge any of the existing scholarship on ideal cities, and partly because they offer cursory summaries of early urbanisms that are sometimes inaccurate. Morrison states, for example, that Atlantis was Plato’s “ideal city” (xvii). While it is true that the ringed urban plan of Atlantis was spectacular, Plato described the city as politically corrupt—his καλλίπολις, or “good city,” was essentially an ideal Athens. More important is the conspicuous lack of discussion of the Judeo-Christian tradition of the New Jerusalem. This is surprising given that Morrison has herself produced scholarship on this very topic, referring to the New Jerusalem as “the ultimate utopian city” and explicating its enduring influence in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe. The exploration of late Renaissance utopias at the start of this book is hampered by a lack of full engagement with the role played by the idea of the New Jerusalem in sixteenth-century millennialism, in the birth of natural science, and in the attendant pansophic movement. The only exception is found in the discussion of Tommaso Campanella’s City of the Sun from 1602, which Morrison thoughtfully compares with Juan Bautista
Villalpando’s contemporary project to render the New Jerusalem as described in Ezekiel. Morrison’s discussions of industrial age utopias are stronger. She provides a useful biography of Robert Owen, explaining how his ideas gathered support in Britain even as he alienated important constituencies. Her analysis of his architecture is brief, unfortunately, and generally disconnected from Owen’s political philosophy, but there are highlights in the two chapters that follow, one on James Silk Buckingham’s 1849 model town of Victoria and one on Robert Pemberton’s The Happy Colony (1854). The former features a well-referenced description of the ills of the Victorian industrial city. The latter offers a strong analysis of both the political philosophy and the architecture of Pemberton’s utopian vision, productively situating his proposal for a glass-roofed college settlement in contemporary debates on the nature of learning and the power of education to improve the condition of the laboring class, as well as the success of London’s Crystal Palace as a venue of working-class edification worthy of civic repetition and amplification. Indeed, this is the best chapter of the book.

The only problem is that the value of the digital model is unclear given the high level of detail contained in Pemberton’s original illustrations. The last two chapters, on King Camp Gillette’s 1894 vision for a corporate Metropolis and Bradford Peck’s The World a Department Store (1900), both feature excellent discussions of historical context and political philosophy, yet they also suffer from the problem that pervades this book: a lack of architectural or urban analysis connecting the designs of the utopian visions to history and politics.

This issue is made worse by the lack of citation of the considerable body of scholarship on these utopias, most unfortunate when Morrison’s ideas seem to parallel those of other scholars, as is the case in her chapters on Albrecht Dürer and Gillette. The chief purpose of the book seems, however, not so much to provide artful scholarship on the history and meaning of these imaginary places as to help them come alive for readers, who are encouraged to enter into the digital models with their imaginations. If the text were reduced to an appropriately cursory exhibition mode and the models were provided as truly immersive virtual environments accessible online or through gaming consoles (and perhaps enhanced a bit by a professional firm such as Ubisoft), there is no question that this would be a most provocative exhibition of unbuilt utopias. As the book stands, however, it is more suggestive of things to come—a utopian project in itself, perhaps, that remains in many respects unbuilt.

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Notes

Neil Levine  
The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright


Given the universal understanding of Frank Lloyd Wright’s ideas on the design of cities as having been definitively embodied in his antiurbanist and pro-ruralist design for Broadacre City of 1929–39, which Wright published as “the disappearing city,” Neil Levine notes in the very first sentence of his introduction that this book’s title, The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright, “might strike many as an oxymoron” (xiv). The extent of Levine’s new book (matching his 1996 work The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright) and the wide range of designs he examines from across Wright’s career are deployed to construct an alternate view of Wright as an architect who, both before and after Broadacre City, was continually engaged in making projects that contribute to the field of urban design. Levine has chosen to present a series of Wright’s projects, prefacing each with a compact but comprehensive summary of both the preceding and parallel developments in the larger discipline of urban design as well as discussion of the character and history of the physical context.

The first section of the book comprises four chapters on Wright’s early urban designs for the streetcar suburbs of Chicago, employing what Wright called his Quadruple Block Plan. Levine indicates how, from the start of Wright’s independent career, he endeavored to weave his designs into the square grid that organized the western territories of the United States after 1785, and on which the rapidly expanding western suburbs of Chicago were grounded. Levine notes the generative nature of the square grid and the pinwheel plan in the formation of both Wright’s Quadruple Block Plan, where they are used to order the houses on the urban block, and the Prairie House, where they are used to order the rooms within the house. Initially developed in 1896 as a means of constructing a group of houses on a single suburban block as a unified cluster defining a small square at its center, the Quadruple Block concept made its first definitive appearance in Wright’s designs for the Prairie House, as published in Ladies’ Home Journal in 1901. “A Home in a Prairie Town,” as Wright titled the design, was presented as an individual house within an urban design, both of which were based on the pinwheel plan, and with the town plan based on clusters of four houses set within a square city block. The houses were oriented so that views were directed away from the other houses, providing each house with an unparalleled degree of both privacy and social connectivity.

Levine emphasizes the fact that, in developing the various versions of the Quadruple Block housing plan from 1901 to 1913, Wright consistently rejected the speculative “real estate” definition of land use and subdivision in the Chicago suburbs, insisting instead on a more idealized vision of urbanism that engaged community and privacy, the individual and the collective. This extends from the Quadruple Block Plan for Charles