Review article
Curating the Urban Utopia of Fun
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The Dreamlands exhibition, staged by curators Quentin Bajac and Didier Ottinger at Centre Pompidou, Paris, during the summer of 2010, explores what could be described as an urban utopia of fun - a fully urbanized society, in which the activity of fun has a key role in the system of production and the spatial organization of cities. This version of utopia juxtaposes two forms in which it was historically formulated. The difference between classical and activist utopia, outlined by Judith Shklar,[1] can also be described as a difference between an imaginary ideal and a real model. Urban utopia of fun blends the two:

- From the classical utopia, it takes the initial form of an island: compare Coney Island and More's New Island Utopia.
- From the activist utopia, it takes the form of a political mechanism based on functionality and rationality: Walt Disney Worlds are as rationally structured and governed as Fourier's *Phalanstère*.

The utopia of fun, as presented in the exhibition, is an imaginary ideal that aspires to become a real model. Taking its title from the Dreamland amusement park, built in 1904 on Coney Island, 'the show considers the question of how World's Fairs [...] and theme parks have influenced ideas and notions of the city'.[2]

In *Delirious New York*, which is itself presented as an exhibit, Rem Koolhaas discusses the funda-mental influence of Coney Island on the urbanism of Manhattan. In a sense, then, the objective of Dreamlands is to generalize this thesis. The subtitle of the exhibition ('from amusement parks to cities of tomorrow') suggests that the late nineteenth century's dream of enjoyment, localized in space (amusement park) and limited in duration (world's fairs), extended spatially and temporally to cover city as such. But what does the exhibition make of the not-that-new description of 'cities of tomorrow' as an offshoot of amusement parks and world's fairs?

Let me first sketch a field of positions into which the exhibited works can be distributed. The nature of their relation with the utopia of fun serves as a guideline here. I will then consider how these different positions, their mutual relationships, and contradictions are (not) brought out in the exhibition concept. Finally, the form of translating *Learning from Las Vegas* from book to exhibition will be inter-preted as exemplary of a formal self-referentiality in the staging of the exhibition as a whole.

Conceived Space and Governmentality
In the first place, there are works that elaborate what we could describe as a Lefebvrian conceived space - sketching, thinking, and laying out the utopia of fun. Whether the underlying motivations are base or sublime, planned or 'non-planned' - in the exhibition, both Walt Disney's dream of what he called *EPCOT* (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow) and Cedric Price's Fun Palace are

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presented - enjoyment is objectified as a supreme function of architecture: 'We have entered now into an age of leisure [...] with the equipment to enjoy it.'[3]

One of the most conspicuous aspects of the development of the utopia of fun - entirely missing in the exhibition, unfortunately - is the ambiguous relation between the 'classic' architectural avant-garde and post-war neo-avant-garde. This ambiguity is based on a tension between planning and spontaneity, between the respective roles of planning professionals and ordinary people in shaping urban space. The omission of this question is surprising in light of today's omnipresence of participatory projects.

Fun urbanism is necessarily based, to a certain degree, on 'non-plan' and on popular enjoyment. In the concept of non-plan, which was introduced in 1969 by Price, Banham et al.,[4] the dominant role of central planning in urban development is taken as the target of criticism. Non-plan advocated popular participation in shaping urban environment. However, it did not take long to realize - and in this, the story is quite similar to that of *Learning from Las Vegas*, published only a few years later - that non-plan is really a plan at a qualitatively new level.

There are two arguments for this. Firstly, planning restrictions at the urban level are parallel to an increased planning complexity at the socio-economic level, the process that Foucault described as governmentality of population.[5] Secondly, non-plan eventually boosts the integration of architectural design and speculative development: 'After the first Thatcher administration was elected in 1979, enterprise zones were introduced as a non-plan experiment. Without enterprise zones, we would have no MetroCentre Gateshead and no Canary Wharf. These are design icons, accurately symbolic of social change.'[6]

Post-war avant-garde is explicitly formulated against the modernist pathos of rationality and planning. Instead of heroic asceticism and engineering logic, we have an unrestrained *joie de vivre* and an individual human being with his or her emotions. Static concrete slabs were replaced by liberated capsules, and *objet*-types gave way to flow patterns. However, rather than being 'against', the logic developed by the post-war avant-garde should be interpreted as a further integration of planning and socio-economic life. It is the sphere of consumption - the sphere that is in the urban plans and discourse of Le Corbusier always somehow underrated at the expense of heroic production and distribution - that is now deeply integrated into the architectural organization of social life.

There is an uncanny resemblance between Price's 'tree-top rides through the (New) Forest'[7] of the immense oil refinery in Fawley and contemporary industrial heritage parks where 'former factory buildings have been converted to accommodate cultural and corporate functions',[8] and, to describe one example, where 'an old gasholder has become the biggest artificial diving centre in Europe; alpine climbing gardens have been created in the former ore storage bunkers, and an extinct blast furnace has been developed into a panoramic tower'.[9]

The questions formulated by the post-war avant-garde are questions of tastes, preferences, and lifestyles. They are questions of leisure, culture (in its contemporary sense), enjoyment, and general well-being. As such, they are closely related to the population's conduct. The obvious paradox is that being the target of discourses, projects, statistics, and evaluations, the sphere of subjectivity and intimacy itself becomes an object of public planning and decision-making. We can thus say: it is in the utopia of the post-war avant-garde that the regime of governmentality achieves its architectural expression.

Fig. 1: View of the exhibition Dreamlands: des parcs d'attraction aux cités du futur, at the Centre Pompidou Paris, 14 April - 19 July 2010. Photograph courtesy of Centre Georges Pompidou/MNAM/Bibliotheque Kandinsky/G. Meguerditch-ian.

No need to say that *EPCOT* voices all this explicitly: 'EPCOT [...] will be like the city of tomorrow ought to be. It will be a city that caters to the people as a service function. It will be a planned, controlled community, a showcase for American industry and research, schools, cultural and educational opportunities. In EPCOT there will be [...] no slum areas because we will not let them develop [...] There will be no retirees. Everyone must be employed.'[10]

Artistic Critique?

Dreamlands thus present works that 'critically' reflect on these conceived spaces. They can be divided into two opposed stances. These works attempt to either present a 'large picture' of the utopia of fun or reveal its artificiality. These, mostly photographic, works either 'take a distance' or 'step closer'; they either work out a feeling of sublime or revel in denouncing everyday kitsch. The problem is that the objective to understand and criticize is ultimately thwarted by a fascination with the studied object.

On one side, Andreas Gursky's or Thomas Weinberger's images of Dubai cannot hide their fascination with the monumentality of speculative development - despite the pronounced desire to understand: 'My preference for clear structures is the result of my desire [...] to keep track of things and maintain my grip on the world.'[11] These images show heroic constructions and developments, not unlike modernist pathos of engineers, flavoured with postmodern ornamentation and glitter.

On the other side, Martin Parr or Reiner Riedler repeatedly disclose what everyone knows in any case. They show non-sense at the core of utopia and they depict its dissolution into absurd banalities of everyday life. However, the position of this contemporary photographic dada vis-à-vis the ubiquity of an urban utopia of fun is similar to the relation between dada and the modernist ideology of the plan, described by Tafuri: 'Dada, through absurdity,

demonstrated the necessity of the plan without ever naming it.'[12]

With no lesser force than Cedric Price or Walt Disney, however, this catalogue of absurdities demonstrates that 'we have entered into an age of leisure' [see note 5]. But an equal - and just as powerful - assertion is made by Gursky's images that simply give visual pathos and godlike perspective to operations of real estate speculation. And not only that: the photograph of World Islands in Dubai, for example, approximates the real shape of the world more closely than the real World Islands. It perfectly conforms to the fact that 'these are design icons, accurately symbolic of social change' [see note 7].

De-Monumentalization

As opposed to the fascination-denunciation continuum that characterizes all three positions mentioned above ('conceived space' and two versions of 'artistic critique'), the fourth one, the 'squaring of the triangle', employs a method of analysing the everyday materiality that underlies the construction of the utopia of fun. Instead of its projection, reproduction, or denunciation, these works seem to offer few altered constructions - no new, well-planned, and sketched-out utopias, but shifts within the existing one. Thus Joachim Mogarra's works, for example, represent iconic architectural objects literally in the form of little constructions made of potatoes, cardboard, and other ordinary materials. The operation here can be described as a 'de-monumentalization' of 'design icons'.

A legitimate question in this respect is: what are the real, social, and material effects of such works? Rather than being involved in the field of architectural production, they seem to deal with its aesthetics. As such, however, they always-already deal with the question of what constitutes a 'real effect': whether an aesthetic solution is inferior to an architectural solution, or whether social reality is

Fig. 2: View of the exhibition Dreamlands. Photograph courtesy of Centre Georges Pompidou/MNAM/Bibliotheque Kandinsky/G. Meguerditchian.

primary and aesthetic sensations are secondary.

Curating

It would have been worthwhile if the exhibition had offered more opportunities for pondering such kinds of questions on the background of history of architectural avant-garde and its implication in the construction of the utopia of fun.

The major problem with the exhibition is, precisely, its curatorial inability to map the contra-dictory positions embodied in the individual works of art and architecture (or, for that sake, to show that these positions are not really important in light of something more fundamental shared by all). It is the problem of mutual relations, communications, and effects between products of artistic and archi-tectural creation, and of relations, communications, and effects between these creations and social space.

Isolated from the question of the institutional forms of production, exhibition, and collective reception of artworks, the ornamental rhetoric of their explanations - which has meanwhile devel-oped into a literary genre of its own - only testifies to the inability of the artworks themselves to do what they announce.

The visitor is struck by a Warhol-like strategy of Dreamlands that mimics the form of an analysed object. The exhibition is staged as a theme park. The experience is divided into a limited number of disparate 'themes'; the latter are then assigned to specific rooms. The exhibition subsequently reads like an 'objective' list of important works that have touched upon the question of leisure and space. The Borges-like categories - 'Definitely Dubai', 'Pierre Huyghe', 'Copy/Paste' or 'Staging the World' - according to which the exhibition has been divided, attest to the lack in terms of the analysis of relation-ships among the selected works.

The spectator's movement through Dreamlands starts as a tunnel ride in the amusement park, where staged scenes are illuminated by spotlights or simply projected onto walls. In the latter part of the exhibition, the visitor progressively emerges from this darkness. Does this suggest a metaphor for enlightenment that the curators might have wished to stage for spectators?

Learning from Las Vegas

The border between the dark and light part of the exhibition is, interestingly enough, located in the room dedicated to *Learning from Las Vegas*. Does this book represent that singular moment when the enigmatic utopia of fun fully blends with the banal, everyday reality, as if inverting the Borges' story of a 'Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire'?[13]

However, there is another parallel between the book itself and the staging of the exhibition that is more interesting in this context. Venturi, Scott-Brown & Izenour subjected modernist practice to criticism mostly in *symbolic* terms (a 'duck'), while advocating a different version of symbolic expres-sion (a 'decorated shed'). The shift thus occurs from one version of 'speaking architecture' to another - whereas the notion of 'duck' goes back to the proto-modern *architecture parlante*, where 'Ledoux [...] endeavoured to give the structure itself such a form that it would, of itself, tell its story',[14] in the post-modern version, the adjective *parlante* would rather denote a double liberation of 'form from content' and of 'façade from form', all the way down to the current experiments with the production of atmos-pheres and envelopes.

So the exhibition did for Venturi, Scott-Brown & Izenour's book what *Learning from Las Vegas* did for architecture - considering it at the level of its symbolic performance. When curators write that '*Learning from Las Vegas* overturned the accepted hierarchies, making commercial architecture and

leisure the key to thinking the urban in the age of the automobile',[15] the book becomes a victim of its own message - interpreting architecture as something to be read from a speeding automobile. Curators interpreted *Learning from Las Vegas* in precisely such a distracted way and 'stripped' [*sic*] the book of the distinction it makes between form and content of the message: 'If the commercial persuasions that flash on the strip are materialistic manipulation and vapid subcommunication, which cleverly appeal to our deeper drives but send them only superficial messages, it does not follow that we architects who learn from their techniques must reproduce the content or the superficiality of their messages.'[16]

Facing the difficult task of exhibiting a book, the curators decided to present it as a diaporama - a rotating sequence of images taken from the publication. Possibly inspired by signs that 'flash on the strip', the result is really that of a 'vapid subcommunication' and of 'reproduced superficiality of their messages' or, rather, of a message superficially reproduced. However naïve Venturi & Scott-Brown's statement appears today, there is still a difference between the two possibilities: that Venturi & Scott-Brown are *conscious* advocates of commercial architecture and that Venturi & Scott-Brown advocated commercial architecture in spite of their intentions. The way Dreamlands translates *Learning from Las Vegas* into a diaporama is precisely the way of ignoring this and numerous other differences.

Sequence of Images
Eventually, the whole Dreamlands exhibition can be perceived as a diaporama exploded into three-dimensional space, where every image is followed by another and another.

Whereas Eisenstein's theory of montage drew on the potential to generate meaning by introducing discontinuity, ambiguity, and contradictions within a sequence of images (and, consequently, within indi-vidual images themselves), diaporama, an 'artistic' variation of a PowerPoint slideshow, is defined by a smooth and well-functioning formal continuity of isolated images. It is a variation on the Coney Island tunnel ride. However, as an exhibition form it lacks the strong curatorial position to generate a network of relationships among images: 'It is no coincidence that the word "curator" is etymologically related to "cure": to curate is to cure. Curating cures the powerlessness of the image, its inability to show itself by itself.' [17]

The role of a curator, then, would be to make images work - together or apart - and not only represent. It would be to 'cure' them of a mere representation (of a style or approach of a particular period, of itself as an artistic masterpiece) by generating new conceptual patterns - one has been suggested above - according to which the images are organized.

The results of Dreamland's curating are ultimately visible in another room named 'Las Vegas', where Martin Parr's, Thomas Struth's and Peter Malinowski's photographs 'of Las Vegas' are presented next to each other. But, precisely, there is no other criterion for exhibiting the three photographs next to each other, except the fact that they are 'of Las Vegas'. Such a constellation of images does not create aesthetic work, but rather reproduces our already saturated notions 'of Las Vegas' and of the utopia of fun.

Notes

1. Judith Shklar, 'The Political Theory of Utopia: From Melancholy to Nostalgia', *Daedalus*, 94, no. 2 (1965), pp. 367-81. See also discussion in Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1978), p. 13.

2. Quentin Bajac, 'DREAMLANDS at the Pompidou' [interview with Quentin Bajac], Aesthetica, 21 May 2010, http://aestheticamagazine.blogspot.com/2010/05/dreamlands-at-pompidou.html [accessed 20 April 2011].

3. Cedric Price in 1963, quot. in Julie Houis and Irène Tsuji, *Dreamlands: Des parcs d'attraction aux cités du futur* [exhibition catalogue] (Paris, Centre Pompidou, 2010), p. 17.

4. Reyner Banham, Paul Barker, Peter Hall & Cedric Price, 'Non-Plan: An Experiment in Freedom', *New Society*, vol. 13, no. 338, 20 March 1969, pp. 435-43.

5. See, e.g., Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

6. Paul Barker, 'Non-Plan Revisited: Or the Real Way Cities Grow. The Tenth Reyner Banham Memorial Lecture', *Journal of Design History*, 12, no. 2 (1999), pp. 95-110, esp. p. 98.

7. Cedric Price, quot. in Richard Williams, 'The Limits of "Non-Plan": Architecture and the Avant-Garde', in *Avant-Garde/Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. by D. Scheunemann (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi B.V., 2005), pp. 283-95, esp. p. 286.

8. *Duisburg-Nord Landscape Park* [webpage of the park], 2011, http://www.landschaftspark.de/en/derpark/index.html [accessed 21 April 2011].

9. Ibid.

10. Walt Disney, quot. in Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power. From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 224.

11. Andreas Gursky, quot. in Katy Siegel, 'The Big Picture', *Artforum International*, 1 (January 2001).

12. Manfredo Tafuri, 'Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology', in *Oppositions Reader*, ed. by K. M. Hays (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), pp. 6-35, esp. p. 19.

13. Jorge Louis Borges, 'On Exactitude in Science', in *Collected Fictions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 325.

14. Emil Kaufmann, 'Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, Inaugurator of a New Architectural System', *The Journal of the American Society of Architectural Historians*, 3-3 (July 1943), pp. 12-20, esp. p. 19.

15. Julie Houis and Irène Tsuji, *Dreamlands...*, op. cit., p. 20.

16. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steve Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas. The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), p. 162.

17. Boris Groys, 'Politics of Installation', *e-flux journal*, 2, (January 2009), pp. 1-8, esp. p. 2, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/31 [accessed 21 April 2011].

Biography

Maroš Krivý is currently finishing his PhD in Urban Studies at the University of Helsinki. In the thesis he discusses the political economy of transforming obsolete industrial space, focusing on the ambiguous role that art and the idea of 'culture' play in this transformation. He has been lecturing in urban studies and architecture theory at the University of Helsinki and the Estonian Academy of Arts in Tallinn. Among his recent publications are 'Speculative Redevelopment and Conservation: The Signifying Role of Architecture' (City journal, 2011) and 'Industrial Architecture and Negativity: the Aesthetics of Architecture in the Works of Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smithson and Bernd and Hilla Becher' (Journal of Architecture, 2010). He presented his work at numerous conferences, most recently at the 8th AHRA Symposium at AA in London and at the Incidental Urbanism conference in Tallinn. Maroš also practices visual art. Recently, he had a solo exhibition New Coat of Paint at the Month of Photography 2011 in Krakow, Poland. He is the winner of sittcomm.award (2011).