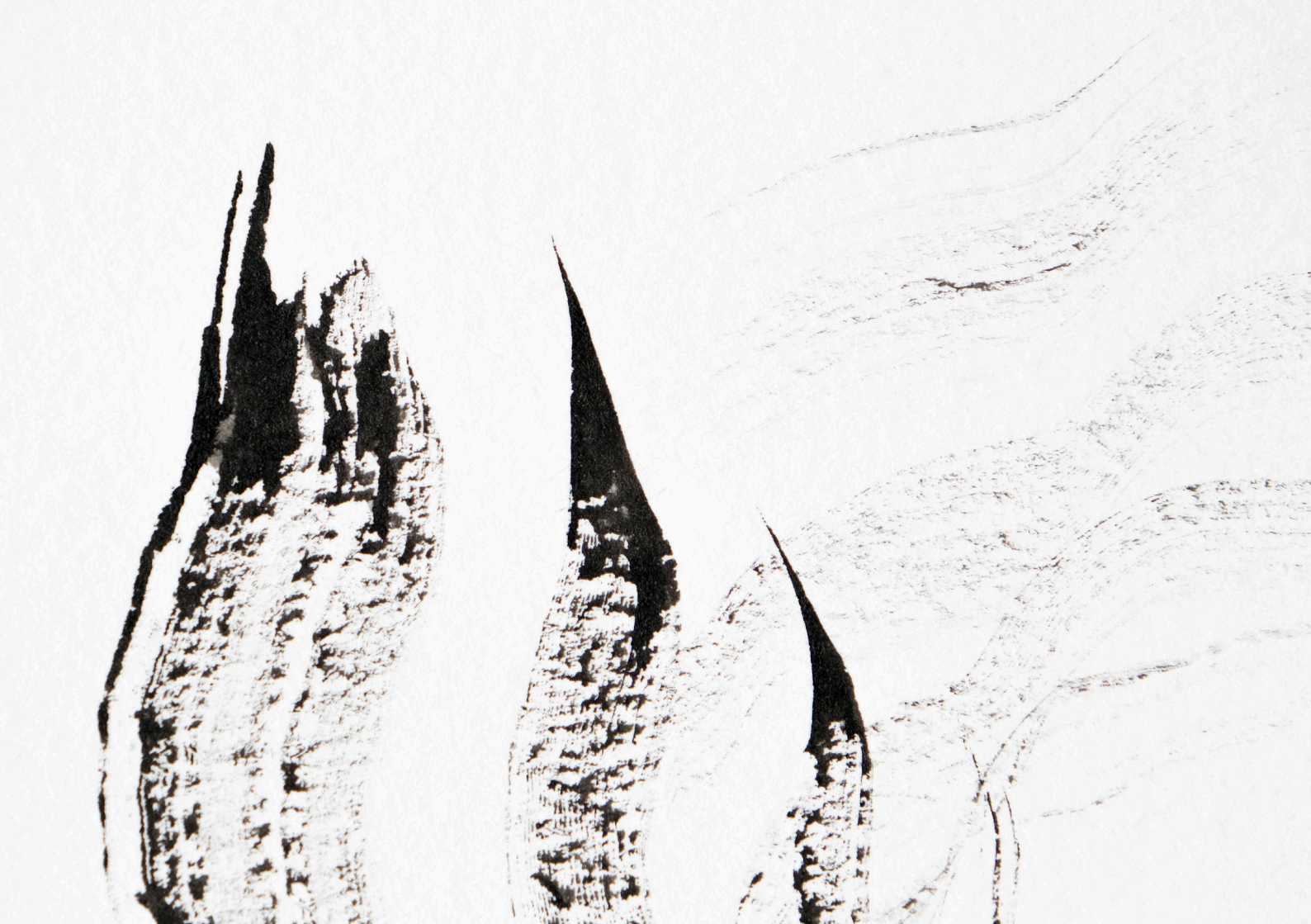
CITIES & WORLDS



Undefined Terrain

Maria Finn

A vacant lot in Malmö caught my attention from the train, and when I later visited the site I discovered a place that had been left to itself, and was therefore undefined and free of use. The area was covered with flourishing and wild vegetation, and frequented by all kinds of local users, for recreational as well as other purposes. Later I found a similar place in Copenhagen that was even larger, with a makeshift skateboard ramp but with vegetation that was no less wild, and which was also frequented by a wide variety of people. These sites today represent utopian spaces within the city insofar as they offer their visitors spaces that resist development. To establish my point of view, I have made a comparative reading of utopias that describe future cities that share the same appearance and qualities as these sites: *News from Nowhere* by William Morris (1890) and *Ecotopia* by Ernest Callenbach (1975). But through these readings I have also found that when you are attempting to envision new ideas for the future, it is hard to let go of concepts that belong to the world you wish to leave behind.

Forgetful Nature

> *It is all about returning, again and again. It is also about finding a method for writing – and for filming. Your feet get tired, but it is necessary to return to discover the small differences. It is a matter not only of the place, but also of the routine. You get to know what to find there. The impossibility of*

> *finding a way to categorize it is also liberating. After recurring visits, you recognize traces left by others. You also get to know other people who know the place. Utopia is a vision for the future, with unintentional remains from the present. Abandoned sites offer an ambivalent position between nostalgia for the past and visions for the future.*[1]

The quote above is taken from my film *Forgetful Nature*, which investigates the function of unregulated spaces in the city – in this case, two abandoned lots with unruly vegetation, frequented by local residents. I have conducted my research as an artist, with frequent visits to the sites to document changes and meet users. Every city contains spaces that have been shaped by oblivion, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. For me, green spaces that have been left to develop on their own have always had a special allure. They represent places without a language, since nobody has defined how they are supposed to be used. In a society where the structures that weave us together have come under pressure and are being replaced with a fragmented reality that consists of contradictory information and opinions, we need places more than ever where everybody feels that they fit in, and where we can meet without obligations.

In 2005, on the train on my way to Malmö, I spotted an area by the railroad track that was covered with fruit trees and high grass – too wild to be a garden, too disorganized to be a park – and I felt an urge to visit it. This part of Malmö is called Ellstorp. There used to be allotment gardens on the site, established for railroad workers; you can still find some on nearby Lundavägen. But the site that caught my attention, which I call the Ellstorp lot, situated between Idaborgsgatan and the railroad, is a large area that has been left to itself for quite some time. All the small houses were torn down when Jernhusen AB bought the area in the 1990s, but the company left the trees standing, and it only occasionally cuts the tall grass and flowers that cover the site. Over the years there have been many plans for the area, but nothing has really happened. In a proposal published by Malmö municipality in 2018,

there is a plan for the whole Kirseberg area, with the intention to create a whole new neighborhood.[2] The Ellstorp lot appears on many of the maps and pictures in the proposal, but is not mentioned as an area worth preserving. Instead, the municipality intends to create green corridors through some parts of the lot to establish a connection between Ellstorp Park and Östervärn station. A vacant lot represents a possibility that has not yet been realized but is still inscribed on the site. The place is waiting for a definition; until then, it defies characterization. Meanwhile, we as visitors can pass through it, and if we slow down, we can also reflect upon how we behave when we enter the unregulated. Years later, I discovered the Beauvais lot on Rovsingsgade in Copenhagen, a place with a similar story. Beauvais, a company that produces canned food, established a factory here in 1895, but production moved elsewhere in 1968, and later the old factory building burned down. In 1983 the area was acquired by the municipality of Copenhagen, which cleared the site; it has since been used for recreational purposes, with the encouragement of the owner, which has also constructed a basketball court here. Today the trees have grown tall, and the lot is covered with brambles and high grass, as well as flowers and nettles.

What struck me was my lack of language to describe the sensation of entering these sites. I had been interested for some time in William Morris's depiction of nature in his patterns, and when I read his utopian novel from 1890, *News from Nowhere,* I recognized a landscape similar to what I was trying to describe. At that time, Morris felt an urge to create his tale as a reaction against developments that he strongly disliked. *Ecotopia*, a novel by Ernest Callenbach from 1975, is a later influential text with sustainability as a core value. Although almost a century passed between these attempts to envision another kind of society, there are similarities that make one wonder if they reveal a deeper and recurring need. *Ecotopia* is a description of a society governed by principles other than consumerism, prioritizing responsible conduct towards the environment. In the novel, William Weston, a journalist for the *Times-Post*, is sent to Ecotopia to report on what is going

Fig. 1. The Beauvais Lot, Copenhagen, 2017.

on there. The young country consists of Northern California, Oregon and Washington, which 20 years earlier were all part of the United States. The narrative in *Ecotopia* is structured by alternating newspaper articles and notes from Weston's personal diary. The articles describe how the society is organized, and they cover everything from health care, education, family life, trade and architecture to scientific achievements. Weston's own notes reveal how he slowly gains respect and admiration for Ecotopia's achievements. What I would like to focus on here are the descriptions of the cities, and the green places in them. Weston writes his impressions of San Francisco:

> *What I found when I had gotten over my surprise at the quiet, was that Market Street, once a mighty boulevard striking through the city down on the waterfront, has become a mall planted with thousands of trees. The 'street' itself, on which electric taxis, minibuses, and delivery carts purr along, has shrunk to a two-lane affair. The remaining space, which is huge, is occupied by bicycle lanes, fountains, sculptures, kiosks, and absurd little gardens surrounded by benches. Over it all hangs the most sinister quiet, punctuated by the whirr of bicycles and cries of children. There is even the occasional song of a bird, unbelievable as that may seem on a capital city's crowded main street.*[3]

This description shows some similarities with the current branding of cities as 'green', a strategy to make them appear more attractive for new residents as well as investors. But Weston also elaborates on another phenomenon: the established cities are broken up into smaller neighborhoods, like decentralized mini-cities. One of these, Alviso, has a population of 9,000 people that live within a half-mile radius of the transit station, and this area is also filled with green: 'But even this density allows for many small park-like places: sometimes merely widening of the streets, sometimes planted gardens. Trees are everywhere – there are no large paved areas exposed to the sun.'[4]

This seems to be an exemplary description of the 'green city', but it also depicts another ideal for the city: small-scale, lush, more like a park than cities as we know them. This is an appealing idea, but what is striking is how much it resembles Morris's vision in *News from Nowhere,* which is set in 2003 and occasionally looks back to the revolution of 1952.[5] For his entire working life, Morris was on a quest for alternatives to what industrialism had brought with it; for this purpose he rediscovered old techniques such as dyeing, weaving and embroidery, which then were employed to create new products for his firm. Morris was not a friend of industrialism, not only because of the poor quality of the goods it produced, but also because of how it affected cities and the countryside. After Morris had successfully established the leading interior design firm in Europe, his political interests increased, and he became a member of the Socialist League, getting involved in the publication of its journal *The Commonweal*. It was for this journal that he wrote his utopian novel *News from Nowhere: An Epoch of Rest*, which appeared in installments between January and October 1890 and was published as a book in 1891. In the novel, the protagonist, William Guest, comes home from a meeting of the League and falls asleep. When he wakes up, he has time-traveled to the future. As he tries to get to grips with the societal changes, he avoids revealing the epoch to which he really belongs to the people he meets. One of these is Hammond, who is old enough to have experienced the period when the changes took place, and who tries to explain them to Guest:

> *'The change,' said Hammond, 'which in these matters took place very early in our epoch, was most strangely rapid. People flocked into the country villages, and, so to say, flung themselves upon the freed land like a wild beast upon his prey; and in a very little time the villages of England were more populous than they had been since the fourteenth century, and were still growing fast. Of course, this invasion of the country was awkward to deal with, and would have created much misery, if the folks*

> *had still been under the bondage of class monopoly. But as it was, things soon righted themselves.'*[6]

This vision of a future England has some similarities with the mini-cities that Callenbach describes in *Ecotopia*. Another striking description of the changes, in this case in London, appears when Guest passes through the city, and his companion Dick points out Kensington Gardens, which Guest indeed remembers:

> *Quoth Dick: 'This is Kensington proper. People are apt to gather here rather thick, for they like the romance of the wood; and naturalists haunt it, too; for it is a wild spot even here, what there is of it; for it does not go far to the south; it goes from here northward and west over Paddington and a little way down Notting Hill: thence it runs north-east to Primrose Hill, and so on; rather a narrow of it gets through Kingsland to Stoke-Newington and Clapton, where it spreads out along the heights above the Lea marshes; on the other side of which, as you know, is Epping Forest holding out a hand to it. This part we are just coming to is called Kensington Gardens; though why "gardens" I don't know.'*
> *I rather longed to say, 'Well, I know,' but there were so many things about me which I did not know, in spite of his assumptions, that I thought it better to hold my tongue.*[7]

Guest knows why it is called 'gardens', since he remembers Kensington Gardens as a huge London park, which has now been swallowed up by the woodland that the city has become. This is a fine example of the way in which cities in this future society have transformed to make way for a landscape consisting of small villages. But the similarities to Callenbach's descriptions in *Ecotopia* are striking, and reveal affinities between the two authors' respective visions. They both share a wish for another kind of environment: greener, but also on another scale – a decentralized model very far from the growing cities that we experience today. I find the blurring

Fig. 2. The Ellstorp Lot, Malmö, 2017.

between country and city that these narrations envision compelling, since I myself have sought out these kinds of places. And it is here that I see a link between the Ellstorp lot in Malmö, the Beauvais lot in Copenhagen and the cityscapes described in *Ecotopia* and *News from Nowhere*.

Both novels' utopian visions wish to create alternatives to the programmes of the day. But they simultaneously open up other questions concerning order and organization. Zygmunt Bauman in *Modernity and the Holocaust* describes the change from premodern societies to their modern successors. If in previous times the governing of society could be likened to a gamekeeper who resides in the forest and keeps an eye from a distance on a society that reproduces itself year by year, with modernism another attitude replaced that of the gamekeeper, namely that of the organizer:

> *The gamekeeper-like complacency would be a luxury one could ill afford. What was needed instead was the posture, and skills, of a gardener; one armed with a detailed design of the lawn, of the borders and of the furrow dividing the lawn from the borders; with a vision of harmonious colours and of the difference between pleasing harmony and revolting cacophony; with determination to treat as weeds every self-invited plant which interferes with his plan and his vision of order and harmony; and with machines and poisons adequate to the task of exterminating the weeds and altogether preserve the divisions as required and defined by the overall design.*[8]

Bauman's description of modern society as a garden culture is uncomfortable, since it makes us realize the degree to which we have accepted this order without questioning its methods. The gardener is a perfect metaphor, since it carries the positive aspects of the pleasant garden without revealing its underlying aggressive struggle against everything that does not fit the plan. With this in mind, I find it interesting that both Callenbach and Morris describe cityscapes that have disappeared and been replaced by forests.

The distinction Bauman makes between gamekeeper and gardener is important, since it exposes the shift from premodern to modern society. The park in the city as part of modernism was designed to serve specific purposes, either as a manifestation of power or for purposes programmed into a plan – usually educational, health or recreational purposes. If Morris wishes to resist industrialization, then Callenbach wishes to create an alternative to the consumerism to which industrialization has led. The descriptions of societies that consist of forests with small, decentralized communities bring to mind the premodern societies on which the gamekeeper kept a distant eye without interfering. In a sense, this is also what the Beauvais and Ellstorp lots represent, since they offer areas without a programme, with little interference, where visitors can experience an environment without coded messages – a rarity in the city. Here the owner acts as the gamekeeper, keeping a distant eye on developments, only intervening when order is disturbed by users claiming temporary ownership. When people try to occupy these places more permanently, they are asked to leave, to prevent other people from feeling insecure when they visit. But when we tread outside the preprogrammed areas and are confronted with decay and self-seeding plants, something else is at stake. Here we experience another sense of time, since everything is left with very little interference, representing a double movement: decay as well as growth. I would like to argue that these places offer a blank space where we can inscribe notions that we wish to redefine. When we enter, we leave something behind; and this is both liberating and bewildering.

What originally attracted me to these sites were their unregulated character, and a sense of escaping the pre-formulated. Most built environments in a city demand a certain behavior that originates from regulations that guide our conduct in public space, mirroring the social fabric of the society that we live in. Morris and Callenbach's novels are fantasies and dreams, limited by the rules set down by the societies that produced them. In both

novels, change is represented by a woman to whom the visitor is drawn, in Morris's version the girl, Ellen, is described as follows:

> *But this girl was not only beautiful with a beauty quite different from that of 'a young lady', but was in all ways so strangely interesting; so that I kept wondering what she would say or do next to surprise or please me.*[9]

Ellen represents the new world, and when the visitor at the end of the novel feels that his time in this imagined future is slipping by she is the last connection. But Morris's vision of the role woman should play in this society comes as across as romantic and less radical than his other projections for the future. In *Ecotopia*, the visitor, Weston, is attracted to a woman called Marissa, who works on the reforestation that the country has put into effect since breaking from the United States. He slowly gets closer to her and in the end makes the decision to stay, since he has not only fallen in love with Marissa but also with her country. Fredric Jameson writes about *Ecotopia* in *Archaeologies of the Future*, his study of utopias and science fiction, where he describes how this ambitious vision for a future society yet contains details that alienate the reader instead of successfully convincing us of the advantages of his ideas:

> *This is also the case, but on a higher anthropological and philosophical level, with that invention of Callenbach's which has always seemed to pose the greatest problem even for his most sympathetic readers, namely the all-male institution of the War Games, in which periodically the men revert to the most primitive weapons – clubs, bows and arrows – and let off steam assaulting each other physically in two opposing groups, sometimes with real casualties.*[10]

This displays a disturbing flaw in Callenbach's vision, revealing an unconscious desire far from the gender equality supposed to exist in this society. Women in these narrations represents the unknown, a space where you can project your fantasies, that in both novels are tainted by stereotypi-

cal thinking. To me, the sites offer a space in the city that allows me to escape these kinds of projections. By comparing *News from Nowhere* and *Ecotopia* I have wished to find a language that could describe the sensations that I find that the sites that I have explored offer the visitor, but I have also discovered how both novels struggle to find a balance between new ideas and old conventions. But if their ideas may have flaws, the descriptions of London and San Francisco taken over by greenery change the idea of what a metropolis should look like. And it is here that I recognize the qualities that I have found in the Beauvais lot, with its overgrown basketball court and brambles growing high, and in the Ellstorp lot, where the old fruit trees create an almost pastoral atmosphere together with wild flowers and remaining species from the previous allotment gardens. Places allowed to thrive without regulations used to be a part of a city's fabric, unexpected areas that challenged conventions and the usual order. To me these places become a utopia in reverse, since they represent what is left undeveloped instead of new ideas. I started this text with a quote from my film *Forgetful Nature* that documents the lots and the users of these places. I would like to end with another quote from the film that sums up my experience of interacting with the sites over a long period of time: 'My utopian space is a place that has been left to its own devices.' In our present situation, utopian thought does not necessarily need to imply that we construct new worlds, since the idea of instead leaving areas to develop without interference in an organic and unpredictable manner seems just as radical today.

1 *Forgetful Nature*, HD video, 13:34 mins, Maria Finn, 2019. http://mariafinn.dk/category/video/.
2 https://malmo.se/Service/Var-stad-och-var-omgivning/Stadsplanering--strategier/Pagaende-oversiktsplanering/Oversiktsplan-for-sodra-Kirseberg-och-Ostervarn.html. Accessed 2 October 2019.
3 Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia* (Berkeley, CA: Banyan Tree Books in association with Heyday, 1975), 11.
4 Ibid., 25.
5 Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 208.
6 William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1993), 104.
7 Ibid., 64.
8 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 57.
9 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, op. cit. (note 6), 203.
10 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2007), 52.