

Art

500 Hundred Years of Failed Utopias

USC Libraries considers what utopia means today, 500 years after Sir Thomas More coined the term for his idealized fictional island.




by Allison Meier

December 13, 2016

Image from the Goodell Monorail Report (1962) (courtesy Metro Los Angeles Library)

Look no further than the current political landscape of the United States to witness that one person's utopia is another's dystopia. But what does utopia even mean?

Since Sir Thomas More coined the term in his 1516 book *Utopia*, this Western vision of an ideal city has more often than not been shadowed by its impossibility. The US that began as a “New World” for religious freedom eradicated the indigenous life in its way, and more extreme attempts at harmonious communal living like Jonestown in Guyana culminated in a grisly 1978 mass suicide. The exhibition *500 Years of Utopia*, curated by Tyson Gaskill, Geoff Manaugh, and Anne-Marie Maxwell at the University of Southern California's (USC) Doheny Memory Library in Los Angeles, considers the legacy of utopia on the 500th anniversary of More's book.

 500 Years of Utopia

“While the genesis of our explorations of utopia came from the 500th anniversary of Thomas More’s publication, the competing notions of utopia and dystopia ended up being incredibly relevant because of the recent elections here and the UK [with] Brexit, where divisive campaign rhetoric was the norm,” co-curator Gaskill told Hyperallergic. “The election results show that voters can reach polar opposite conclusions given the same basic information. It took us a while to figure out a way to present this dichotomy in an exhibition setting, but *Utopia* ended up being the perfect springboard for this.”

Illustration for Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* (courtesy USC Libraries)

To emphasize this division, visitors read the *Utopia* label text with red and blue decoder glasses, the rosy ones offering the positive history of collaborative living, while the blue bring into focus texts more critical of the pitfalls of communal endeavors.

The decoder glasses for *500 Years of Utopia* (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

“The collections we drew from all work to demonstrate how utopian thinking has underwritten experimental communities throughout Southern California — and much further afield — for generations now, from health retreats and New Age co-ops to futuristic urban visions of Los Angeles itself,” said co-curator and architecture writer Manaugh. He added that, much like the dual perspectives offered by the

glasses, the curatorial direction had two levels, one being that utopia is in a constant state of flux and building, and the other that it's not totally impossible.

“Unfortunately, utopia just happens to have a short life-expectancy,” Manaugh added. “On the other hand, we also wanted to suggest that utopia is, in a sense, already here and has been for some time. The problem is that we don't all have access to it. In other words, utopia is as much about exclusion as it is inclusion, about who is allowed to participate in the perfect society and who is deliberately exiled or overlooked, and this fundamental tension can be seen in all of the examples we have on display.”

Similar to last year's **What Makes a Monster? exhibition** at USC Libraries, which considered how the idea of the monster has shifted to implicate both those in power and marginalized people, *Utopia* delves into the library holdings and other collections to reveal how art, literature, and propaganda have augmented public opinion. Different display cases have different themes, such as “Dreams of a Civic Wonderland,” which focuses on urban and architectural utopian visions, featuring prints for Tony Garnier's 1932 project “**Une cité industrielle**.” However this “Industrial City,” intended for the south of France and neatly oriented with sectors for work, housing, health, and leisure, was never realized. The “Born This Way” section includes newspaper articles and a flyer for the 1970s-era Gay Liberation Front, which tried, and failed, to form its own utopia — the “**Stonewall Nation**” — by encouraging LGBTQ people to move to northern California's Alpine County.

Illustration from Tony Garnier's “Une cité industrielle, étude pour la construction des villes” (Paris, C. Massin, 1932)
(courtesy USC Libraries)

Illustration from Tony Garnier's "Une cité industrielle, étude pour la construction des villes" (Paris, C. Massin, 1932)
(courtesy USC Libraries)

"We saw a pattern emerge in these idealistic experiments, in which the writers or organizers at first try to break from traditional class, culture, and gender hierarchies but ultimately founder due to human foibles and unconscious biases," Gaskill stated.

Even Los Angeles itself is featured in the exhibition, as a city of Disneyland monorails, with a temperate climate and serene suburbs, but that is also plagued by the gridlock of freeways and urban planning dominated by pavement. Government-mandated urban planning frequently overlooks community needs, and any utopia dreamed up by a small group will likely set that group's desires above all others. Five centuries after More imagined his island, with shared property and each person in their appointed place, the perfection of our cities remains quixotic. Utopia, as the somber blue label text at USC Libraries notes, "literally means 'nowhere'."

"The Youth Communes: New Way of Living Confronts the U.S.," from *Life* (July 18, 1969) (courtesy USC Libraries)

"The Cult of Death," *Newsweek* (December 4, 1978) (courtesy USC Libraries)

Flyer from Gay Liberation Front records (1970s) (courtesy USC Libraries)

Installation view of *500 Years of Utopia* (courtesy USC Libraries)

Illustration from Tony Garnier's "Une cité industrielle, étude pour la construction des villes" (Paris, C. Massin, 1932)
(courtesy USC Libraries)

500 Years of Utopia continues at the **USC Doheny Memorial Library** (3550 Trousdale Parkway, Los Angeles) through February 9, 2017.

© 2022 Hyperallergic.