

Utopia Brought into Life: Socialist City Planning

Borbála Jasz

Abstract: After WWII the main goal in city planning was the reconstruction of the urban landscape across Europe. Relying on the results of the classical modern movement this was a common project all over Europe. At the beginning of the 1950s in eastern Central-Europe a distinct socialist approach emerged with the motto: «national by form, socialist by content». This is called socialist realism, which returned to a classical architectural form-language on the surface of decorations, but at the same time it also retained modernism under the surface in a hidden way. In fact, a modern structure has been decorated with mixed elements from the history of architecture. Newly built social realist cities emerged in the region, e. g. Stalin city [Dunaújváros] in Hungary, or complete districts were renewed by using the then current form-language, e. g. in Warsaw.

This approach was terminated and changed by Khrushchev's famous industrialisation speech in 1954. At that point a new era began: the age of the prefabricated house block systems. The utopian concept in eastern Central-European urban planning and design during the years of socialism can be observed in two ways. The general pre-theoretical use of the expression 'social realism' refers to all styles during this era. However, we need to distinguish between late/soviet modern and socialist realism, and this can be accomplished by analysing the different utopian visions as an urban design method in these two distinct periods.

These kinds of concepts were related to the rethinking of the society. After WWII the need of people was a just, equal and calculable society and the task of city planners was to embody these utopian thoughts. The problem, however, is that mechanised cities with perfectly designed operation of the built environment do not function very well. The situation is like the country of scientists in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Perfectly measured environments often trade mechanical operation for the human touch and for the human comfort, and for a variety of reasons perfectly measured machine cities do not function very well.

In my paper I will first examine the meaning of utopia in city planning in the 20th century and distinguish the ideal and utopian way of urban design. For symbolising this, I will

analyse the Mundaneum Project as a case study and as a reference to the background of the socialist architecture. Second, I will analyse the base of socialist utopian planning methods, (a) the renewing of elements of decorative architecture and (b) the returning to the mechanical city concepts of the interwar period. After that I will analyse the results of these theories in eastern Central-Europe after WWII: [1] the socialist realist urban design and [2] the soviet modern city planning. Finally, I will criticise these utopian masterplans of socialist realist and socialist modernist cities from the aspects of from the point of view of the targets pursued.

Keywords: Mechanical city, socialist city, socialist realism, socialist modernism, architectural utopia, interwar period.

Introduction. The notion of utopia in architecture

The classical vision of utopia is observable in different ways during the modern history of architecture. It was based on the theory of Henri Lefebvre, a proactive supporter of utopian thinking (CUNNINGHAM 2010: 268). In urban planning we need to distinguish different cases of existing and projected or imaginary cities. For this analysis first we need to clarify how and why an architecture theory could be considered utopian or ideal.

The first fully planned ideal city of the Renaissance was described and illustrated by Filarete about 1457–64. In his Treatise on architecture, of which the earliest, fully illuminated and preserved example can be found in the Codex Magliabechinus in Florence, the fictitious city of Sforzinda and its surroundings are considered, and the provision of building materials dealt with. (ROSENAU 1959: 53)

We can compare the ideal and the utopian city by using 5 criteria:

	Ideal city	Utopian city
Concept	Open	Closed (reportage of something that has already been completed)
Geography	Fictitious	Existing
Society	Ideal	Communist equality

Reality	Given historical-political reality	Criticism of the given reality
Number of citizens	Not limited	Limited

This means that the main goal of the Socialist Realist cities was to combine the advantages of the ideal and utopian concept of the city, of course without the disadvantages. The socialist city is closed, existing, it's society is dominated by communist equality, has a given historical-political reality and the number of citizens is not limited. Marxism as a philosophical background must be added to this concept with its dialectical materialism and dialectical utopianism (CUNNINGHAM 2010: 269). In the era of late modern, the concept of prefabricated house block system would be an improved version of the Socialist Realist model: this was the born of the real Eastern Central-European utopia. The concept of the prototype, the Unite d'Habitation building of Le Corbusier revitalised the Phalanstery in urban scale.

1. Case study from the interwar period: the Mundaneum Project

There are several examples for the utopian planning approach from the ancient times, but the modern usage of this attitude in architecture is based on an international debate of the interwar period. The starting point of the international architectural debate was a competition for the League of Nations Palace at Geneva and the Mundaneum project. For Le Corbusier the mission is to get the more adequate human passion: the harmony. The other platform by Hannes Meyer (the 2nd director of Bauhaus) and Karel Teige (Czech ideologist) is that life is not about human soul and metaphysics, but about economical functionality (COHEN 2014: 1).

Teige focused on the statement of Hannes Meyer, but Le Corbusier answered to Teige and to Meyer as well. The statements were as follows. Le Corbusier's thesis was based on machine aesthetics and he emphasised the roles of engineer's beauty notion and scientific criteria. In Hannes Meyer's theory the function is the most important aspect, because life cannot be described with the terms of art and aesthetics, so life simply means function (TEIGE 1929).

In this dominant debate of the interwar period, we can see an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the aim of the new architecture. Designers used various applications of different fields of the special sciences to target keeping architectural heritage and meeting

new challenges of their age: economics, sociology, philosophy, history of art and architecture. The function related to the architecture, the style to aesthetics and art, and the architectural writing to the communication with the masses. Architectural design is based on considering social factors: living in calculated spaces (e.g. the method of Le Corbusier's Modulor in case of Unite d'Habitation) (LE CORBUSIER 1956). The debate seems like an architectural controversy, but it is in connection with the analysis of human's nature: the 'machine man'-paradigm of Le Corbusier and a more organic approach of Karel Teige and Hannes Meyer. Thus, the real roots of a seemingly purely architectural controversy can be traced in the underlying philosophical, sociological and anthropological views of the architects. Their solutions are determined by considerations at the overlapping borderline areas of these disciplines.

Hannes Mayer and Le Corbusier were two significant members of modern architecture movement in the interwar period. Both emblematic architects pay great attention to the systematic, scientific justification in architecture, however, they represent contradicting approaches. The starting point of the international debate was the competition of the League of Nations Building in Geneva to which both Le Corbusier and Meyer submitted their modernist entries. The debate regarding their different approaches evolved from this competition following the publication of the Czech critic, architectural writer and ideologist Karel Teige. Meyer's standpoint was represented by Teige, but Le Corbusier answered to Teige and Meyer as well. Le Corbusier's machine aesthetics dominated architecture is based on the criteria of architectural aesthetic and science. Teige, according to Hannes Meyer (the second director of the Bauhaus) argued against Le Corbusier, he preferred the function, because life itself is a function (TEIGE 1929: 145-155).

The debate has several platforms; therefore, we can speak about a complex space of the discourse. The precursor was the foundation of the League of Nations, and the foundation of CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture) in 1928. The prominent figure of the CIAM was Le Corbusier. In connection with the foundation of the League of Nations we can speak about the opposition between the conservatives and the progressives, however, distinctions must be made even between the different trends in architecture of that era. The basis of modern architecture in the 1920s was a social attitude. The aim was to improve society with which they also intended to solve the problems of society by providing dwellings after WWI. In the process of the development

of such plans, we may come across those contradictions, the thematization of which may help us unfold the various trends in architecture.

The League of Nations was founded after WWI. This was the first organization to pursue and maintain world peace. In 1926 an international competition was started for the design of its buildings in Switzerland, and first it was won by Le Corbusier, but later his competition submission was excluded for formal reasons. The conflict began to unfold with this building, which further evolved with the design of the Cité Mondiale. The basic idea of the Mundaneum originates from Paul Otlet, a Belgian documentalist and utopian internationalist. It was the task of the architect to implement this ideology into architecture.

The project located on an international site overlooking Lake Geneva, at the foot of the Jura Mountain. The features of cosmopolitanism and internationalism prevailing already in the *genius loci*, gained preference over the regional and personal attitude in order to create an international city. All this was the great task of post-war peace, which, together with the Palace of Nations, was meant to become the centre of the modern world. It is supported by five functions, which, as the institutions of intellectual creativity, were included in the design: library, space for the scientific communities, university, museum, and institutions. This complex is a unified centre of sciences, philosophical and artistic associations, social and artistic movements, and also houses an educational and hygienic centre and an archive. The focal point of Paul Otlet's idea was universal interdependence, and unified culture, and civilization crossing borderlines, uniting 2 billion people. In the building he incorporated biological and physical aspects that embody the international economic, political and social life. The objective was to keep peace and the international union. Otlet regarded the Panathenaea, the library in Alexandria, the ancient Chinese encyclopaediae, medieval monasteries, abbeys and cathedrals, universities, royal palaces, Versailles, the French and Russian scientific academies and the Port Royale as his ideological forerunners. This building complex was meant to become the institution of intellectual life and culture (SOMSEN - VAN ACKER 2012: 90-94).

Several aspects need to be considered when we would like to understand Le Corbusier's architectural design. It is located on a spectacular site overlooking Lake Geneva where it can be seen from all around. In his architectural vision, there was a developed and diverse infrastructure with railways, highways, parks and harbours. The site illuminated by light towers is on a plateau where the building complex could stretch out. The museum systematically demonstrates the synthetic history and arts of

humankind, the mission of technology and society. Two separate fields needed space there: the scientific and historical fields of international geography. It is not the objective of the museum to preserve, but to demonstrate systematically the critique i.e. a kind of 'idearium', and its usage in the school system also has to be taken into account. According to Le Corbusier, the museum needs a triple division, based on the categorization of location, time, and type. All this was visualized by the architect as a spiral ramp without steps, at the bottom of which the 'scanarium', the unit incorporating ethic, philosophy and religion was planned. This may be a building evoking the most problems and criticism, but the building of the library taking the shape of a huge prism is similarly problematic. The architectural bases are the Soviet palaces in Moscow, similarly to the Palace of Nations (TEIGE 1929: 144-145).

Teige played an important role in the 1920s in Czechoslovakia, as the poet of visual words and optical form and as an architectural writer, but it is equally important how he responded to the contemporary European architecture.

Regarding the discourse between Teige and Le Corbusier, the analysis of two manifesto-type writings become important. One is Le Corbusier's volume *Towards a New Architecture*, (LE CORBUSIER 1923) which was published in 1923. It was compiled from the collection of articles published in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, therefore, its structure is rather problematic. The other work is Hannes Meyer's proclamation entitled *Bauen* (MEYER 1928: 12-13), which defines the task of modern architecture in a free verse.

In Le Corbusier's work, the polemics already appears in the title, as the term *Vers une architecture* literally means *Towards an architecture*. Word by word interpretation is especially important in Le Corbusier's architectural theory and practice. (LE CORBUSIER 1923) In his article written to Teige in 1929, he explains that the meaning of the last word is fashion, but timeless words have exact meanings, the pure words themselves (LE CORBUSIER 1929).

Thus, the main features of the friendly discourse manifesting between Le Corbusier and Teige become visible. Teige first outlines the concept of the Mundaneum, and then criticizes Le Corbusier for using archaic forms. In his view, it can be regarded as the misconception of the program as in this way it becomes historical and archaeological. Teige criticizes the concept for its absurdity. He emphasizes that the architectural problems identified by Le Corbusier are not clear ideologically, therefore, they cannot be identified properly in architectural terms. The objective to improve society cannot be realized, since society itself is not ready yet to accept it. Instead of

monumentality, here, in his opinion, we can see the manifestation of megalomania. He considers Le Corbusier's machine concept, according to which a dwelling is a machine, as the complete depreciation of aestheticism and academism. In my opinion, Teige's objection is not grounded, since the architect's public building design is no longer the design of a dwelling but rather an ideology-based utopia (TEIGE 1929: 144-145).

Teige states that the Mundaneum is an architectural project, which cannot be evaluated as art. The fault lies in Le Corbusier's theory of aesthetic and form, which may be criticized from the aspect of constructivism for golden section and geometrical proportions, because he uses numeric and astronomic rules. This a priori aesthetic and geometrical speculation is not in conformity with life. The Mundaneum is a composition, manifesting a metaphysical and ideological imagination. The objective of this visual metaphysics is an intellectual matter, the divine mission of architecture, which does not take into account aspects based on utility and practicality because in the beauty ideal of the antiquity and the Renaissance utility is not a major aspect in designing. He emphasizes that life cannot be depicted with the means of geometry as Le Corbusier does (TEIGE 1929: 144-145).

In opposition, Le Corbusier believes that «art starts where architecture ends». To Teige, the architect's practicality is the most important in the first place. Although he needs professional knowledge, he does more than that. He responds to eternity. Teige examines what effect such demand for monumentality has on the building itself and concludes that in this way the building becomes a monument. Apart from that, he also expresses his opposition in terms of both the inner and outer formulation of the building. Thus he says that the practical role of objects do not play a role in Le Corbusier's autocratic art. He points out that it is not an ideological, aesthetic or metaphysical intention or even the love of art that should govern life but strictly pragmatic aspects.

In 1929 Le Corbusier answers Teige in *Defence of Architecture* (LE CORBUSIER 1929) and there the objectives of his work are more clearly articulated, the most fundamental one being that he aims at discovering the pure origin of architecture. Le Corbusier welcomes that in the Czech architecture response to problems is so vivid, although, he emphasizes that in their era machine harmony is what matters rather than connections with the past. His answer to the lack of utility is that aesthetics aims at depicting fundamental human functions, where development is not the objective, but the means, like with Meyer who wanted to enforce functionalism in the economy as well (COHEN 2014: 7-8).

To Le Corbusier, effectiveness, instead of utility, will become the key word, as a result of applying mathematical and engineering knowledge, and it has to ensure stylishness, being an important aspect of Le Corbusier's architecture. In his opinion, human talent and stylishness manifest in the composition, whether it is the design of a pen or a warship. «*In the last decades practically unusable houses and palaces have been built and it is not my fault...*» (LE CORBUSIER 1929). Le Corbusier's viewpoint is that they came to a turning point in architecture, the moral task of which is to restore the current moral order. In Le Corbusier's eye, Teige is a poet, and they both try to achieve the same, i.e. the purest quality and stylishness. Here he uses the utilitarian idea of *Sachlichkeit* in his argument, according to which what is useful is beautiful, but it is not necessarily useful what is beautiful.

Then Le Corbusier responded to Teige's accusations, regarding machinism and mechanization. Among the advantages of mechanisation, he mentioned that already in 1914 in the Dom-ino structural design he discovered how standardisation, the principles of Taylorism, free design during the designing of the façade and the roof garden could be used. However, he admitted that it was only in 1929 when he could apply the principles in practice, which he clearly saw earlier. Finally, to the accusation of academism he replies with a question; «*Why is only the pyramid accused of academism and why is the cube not?*». In his view, architecture had always been restricted to the geometry of Euclidean forms (sphere, cone, cube, cylinder, pyramid) (HAYS ed. 1998: 608).

Summarizing the discourse, we can say that the two trends of the modernism of the 1920s set the objective to improve society, but along different principles supported by a different form language and ideology. The discussion unfolded tasks of the competition of the Palace of Nations and the design of the Mundaneum. During the discourse between Le Corbusier and Karel Teige, the difference in opinion was not resolved, in fact it deepened, and opened a way to contemporary schools of architecture like the Bauhaus, lead by Hannes Meyer. The three identifiable moot points can be listed under functionalism and aesthetics. Le Corbusier favoured the composition achieved by effectiveness, stylishness and harmony, whereas in Teige's opinion it was because pragmatic aspects had to dominate in architecture just as seen in Meyer's case. Distinctions between the two trends also evolve in the aforementioned architectural projects, where a utopian, metaphysical intention collides into functionalism-led practicality, utility and practice. This practice unveils the development of contemporary Czech theory of architecture and represent a considerable change in Le Corbusier's career.

2. *Socialist realism and socialist modernism*

A similar form of form-function debate can be observed in eastern Central-Europe after World War II. In the following section, I will analyse the base of socialist utopian planning methods, (a) the renewing of elements of decorative architecture, the socialist realism and (b) the returning to the mechanical city concepts of the interwar period, the socialist modernism.

2a. *Socialist Realist utopia*

The beginnings of the original Russian socialist realism can be dated in the times after WW1. The aim was to express the radical critique of the state against the avant-garde and abstract art and return to the realist style, which was based on the philosophical-ideological background of Marxism-Leninism. In different artistic disciplines the new style meant 'back to the reality', but in architecture it was a returning to ancient times and rethinking of the historical heritage of architecture as an art form. It is important to emphasise that architecture was defined as art, because of the decorated surfaces, but under the forefront engineers used the latest modern technology.

The first utopian approach is the classical Socialist Realism. The typical method and scale was the city planning, which was dominant after WW2 in eastern Central-Europe. This type of constructing style is closely related to the architectural demonstration of the power of the state. To express the intentions of the Stalinist government architects had to work out a new form language for urban design, but this form language had to be applied even at the level of individual buildings as well. It had a utopian character, which was created in order to hide reality, and to construct a beautiful illusion to be presented as the truth. The task of a writer or artist consisted in creating the illusion of a false reality, the illusion of a better life in socialism; moreover, the bright future was also described as if it already existed. This is the reason why socialist realism is not a style but also a building method with architectural form language in the era of dictatorship (HUET 1998: 254).

The main goal of the original Stalinist model of socialist realism was to express the power of the state. The motto was «*national by form, socialist by content*». In the Soviet Union they chose elements from the ancient Roman culture to emphasise the historical heritage of the Soviets and representative decorations from the Baroque architecture, which

resulted in the so-called 'Stalin Baroque'. «*In Stalinism, however, utopia was proclaimed as already having been built, the future had already arrived, and the only thing that remained was to experience utopia and equip the world for new and even greater prosperity*» (DOBRENKO 2013: 194).

We need to distinguish between different levels of Soviet-type urban design.

[1] The basic level is the original Stalinist model in the Soviet Union after WW1.

[2] The second level is reconstruction and renovation after WW2, in the original style, but in a renewed classical version of socialist realism, e.g. in Warsaw.

[3] The third level is the Socialist Realism in eastern Central-Europe. The starting point is different in the Visegrad countries, but it was finished by the architectural speech of Nikita Khrushchev on 31st December 1954. The first three levels are related to the neoclassical style of Socialist Realism, existing in eastern Central-Europe only.

[4] The fourth level was the age of precast house block systems, which have been widely utilised around Europe. This model could be region-specific and the starts of application were slightly different in the different countries.

A building method in this case means that in the architecture of Marxism gigantism and neoclassical style elements were combined. There were four criteria of the concept of Socialist Realist art (including architecture). First of all the basis of the new society is the class of workers, thus the art and architecture must be [1] understood by workers. It has to be [2] realistic, because the Soviet state is against the modernism and the avant-garde. It has to be, of course, [3] revolutionary, which quality is related to the typical genre of the era. The manifesto, e.g. the prototype was the Communist manifesto in 1848 by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. At last [4] it must have its main topic from scenes of everyday life of everyday people, because everybody is equal in this utopian society.

In eastern Central-Europe, Socialist Realism was dominant in the 1950s only, from 1950 until the death of Stalin in 1954. There are lots of differences between the architecture of this era and the original Soviet version of the new style, because of the motto: «*national by form, socialist by content*». In Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland, a nation specialised version of Socialist Realism was realised – of course in the given framework which is in many aspects different from the classical Stalin-baroque in Moscow (MOLNAR 2013: 70). This new style was developed by modernist architects of the interwar period, but they had to work under the pressure of the Communist Party: they were not allowed to plan what they really wanted to do. In case of the industrial

architecture of the first half of the 1950s, stylistic requirements were ignored, contrary to the case of representative public buildings (HUET 1998: 257).

Architecture, as spatial architectonics, could be seen as the quintessential genre of Socialist Realism...[its] central role in Stalinist culture has its own logic in that building and spatial organization lie at the heart of Marx's account of society: the base-and-superstructure model. This potential was picked up in Bolshevik Party rhetoric about 'building communism.' Building also assumed tremendous importance in Stalinist culture because of the utopian aspects in the notion of living 'in Communism,' the perfected society. (ZARECOR 2011: 128)

Complete districts and whole cities were built in this renewed historical style. The core structure of the houses and the cities built like a classical modernist plan, but the architects had to use the required historical ornaments. This tendency resulted in building the Socialist Realist cities with baroque structure (cour d'honneur mass formation) across Eastern Central-Europe.

2b. *Socialist modernist utopia*

On the day when contemporary society, at present so sick, has become properly aware that only architecture and city planning can provide the exact prescription for its ills, then the time will have come for the great machine to be put in motion and begin its functions.... The house that can be built for modern man (and the city too), a magnificently disciplined machine, can bring back the liberty of the individual – at present crushed out of existence – to each and every member of society. (LE CORBUSIER 1924: 143)

There was a shift from socialist realism to socialist modernism, where the socialist ideology and the Le Corbusierian architecture was combined. Nikita Khrushchev commented the new aims in his Industrialised building speech: «*Use of pre-fabricated reinforced concrete will allow us to manufacture parts as is done in the plant-construction industry – will make it possible to switch to factory construction methods*». (KHRUSHCHEV 1954)

In order to understand the socialist modernist architecture and the creation of built environments in the name of utopian thought, we must return to several points of the Athens Charter.

8. The advent of the machinist era has provoked immense disturbances in the conduct of men, in the patterns of their distribution over the earth's surface and in their undertakings: an unchecked trend, propelled by

mechanized speeds, toward concentration in the cities, a precipitate and world-wide evolution without precedent in history. Chaos has entered the cities. (LE CORBUSIER 1933)

The task is to make the planning method more rational and calculable. These tendencies were born in the interwar period by Le Corbusier and the school of Bauhaus, but the real embodiment happened only after WW2. By utilising the proportion system and the prefabricated houseblock systems, they finally met the challenges that had been formulated in the interwar period.

Another point of Athens Charter: «72. *This situation reveals the incessant accretion of private interests ever since the beginning of the machinist age*» (LE CORBUSIER 1933). In socialist cities, in the name of equality the city and its houses needed to be undecorated symbols for the just society. There were no differences in floor plans or between the façades between the floors. The calculated, practical floor plan, the fully equipped apartment, and the social model attached to it, were all part of an ideal world that could never really come to embodiment; it remained a purely utopian theory.

Conclusion

To summarise, after the theoretical background, where I analysed the idealist and utopian concept of cities, in this paper I examined socialist utopian architecture and its antecedents. As a case study I analysed the Mundaneum project and the surrounding debate by Le Corbusier and Karel Teige. This large-scale project in the interwar period emphasized that debate between form and function, the importance of decoration and the usage of a figurative/non-figurative form language, or practicality and functionalism. Several functions were planned in one complex institution, like in case of neighbourhood units of both socialist architecture styles.

A similar form of the form-function debate may be observed in eastern Central-Europe after World War II in case of socialist utopian planning methods. The first is the socialist realism, which means the renewing of the elements of decorative architecture, while the socialist modernism is the returning to the mechanical city concepts of the interwar period, the socialist modernism.

Both socialist architecture styles, the socialist realism and socialist modernism are utopian in two ways. On the one hand, both styles are the embodiments of the Marxist-Leninist ideology, but with different architectural appearances on the surface: a historical element-

decorated and a modernist one. On the other hand, the structures on the level of apartments, houseblocks and cities are functional both in case of socialist realism and socialist modernism.

The utopian character in socialist architectures is apparent in creating the illusion of a false reality, the illusion of a better life in socialism; moreover, the bright future was also described as if it already existed.

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