Post-Political Attitudes on Immigration, Utopias and the Space Between Us

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Politics is not made up of power relationships; it is made up of relationships between worlds.¹

Geopolitical space has always been a conflicted and fragile topic. Borders and frontiers are changing so fast that sometimes one’s sociopolitical status can change from “citizen” to “immigrant” or remain “immigrant” much of your life. We are getting used to words like refugee, enclave, war, borders, limits. This critical condition is not a minor problem. The International Migration Report 2006 states that in 2005, there were nearly 191 million international migrants worldwide, about three percent of the world population, a rise of 26 million since 1990. This is one of the biggest political problems we face. In this context, we can see how the political implications of some architects had led them to design what we may call “critical utopias.” The concept of dystopia is a critic and utopia is an evocation of a new world to come. This duality was the basis of some radical projects of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Superstudio’s Twelve Ideal Cities, their satirical vision of humanity’s search for an ideal world, or Archizoom’s No-Stop City.

Pier Vittorio Aureli wrote that architectural thought can propose an alternative idea of the city rather than simply confirm its existing condition, and Manfredo Tafuri noted in his 1976 book:

Architecture now undertook the task of rendering its work “political.” As a political agent the architect had to assume the task of continual invention of advanced solutions, at the most generally applicable level. In the acceptance of this task, the architect’s role as idealist became prominent.²

Recently, Joseph Grima wrote an open letter to President of the Eu-

ropean Council about the social, cultural and political implications of a bridge between Europe and Africa across the Strait of Gibraltar, and is easily to see that this is a kind of uncomfortable proposal for such politicians inasmuch as their political ideas are based on words like "control" more than "bridges." Grima proposes the idea of a city where migratory flows are not an unfortunate yet inevitable reality, but rather the mainstay of its identity. The main issue is to avoid that this new archipelago or infrastructure, capable of linking two territories become the non-place described by Marc Augé. Augé pointed out in 1995 that Europe assumes its full meaning in relation to the distant elsewhere, formerly colonial, now under-developed. This still applies today. Recent events in Norway and the reaction of right-wing leaders are among the many examples of the great political “problem” posed by immigration, as seen by governments of developed countries. Augé also recalls these this kinds of movements, part of the same phenomenon are based on an important criterion of hyper-modernity: individuality and singularity. This makes us think again about the importance of utopias and makes us wonder if the utopic proposals that face this conflicts are helpful nowadays.

It is a city made only of exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions. If such a city is the most improbable, by reducing the number of abnormal elements, we increase the probability that the city really exists.

All we have to do now is ask some questions regarding the exclusion and violence, physical and emotional, generated by the ‘journey’ of migrant people to discover new territories, and relate it to our response as architects. Jean Baudrillard wrote in Utopia Deferred: Writings from Utopie [1967--1978]:

The equivalent of a symbiosis between a few architects and young intellectuals effectively occurred at the end of the 1960s, but at that time, it seems to me that architecture didn’t have the façade, the surface that it has today. And since these architects were still unknown, they could take more risks in a certain way, leave their “technical” space so as to see elsewhere.

It’s time to think whether we are acting with some political engagement while using our utopic projects to respond to the conflicts men-


4 The 2011 Norway attacks were two sequential lone wolf terrorist attacks against the government, the civilian population and a Workers’ Youth League (AUF)-run summer camp in Norway on 22 July 2011, claiming 77 lives. (source: wikipedia 11/8/12)


tioned above. Following Tafuri’s and Aureli’s idea that architecture can be political and architects can act as political agents, we want to talk here about two projects that go beyond the simple utopian approach to radically confront the immigration problem as a major socio-political and socio-economic change in the last twenty years.

... we are within a new experience, which is of our times and places us in the new utopian condition; or, rather, makes us face the ‘potenza’ of utopia.\(^7\)

The potenza of utopia mentioned by Negri can be found in the idea behind the N.E.M.O. Project [the Northern Europe Migrants Organisation], an entreprise that enables people to illegally migrate to the United Kingdom. This fictional project proposed an organization able to end immigration and human trafficking problems while creating a kind of non-place in the port of Calais. You’re able to book on-line, ask for a fake passport and even request English lessons during the journey. The passenger then arrives in a secret base located in a Second World War bunker near the city of Calais. The facilities are only 42 km off the British coast. The fictional essence of this project is at the same time, a critique of the system and how governments allow human traffic between different countries, and deny the freedom of movement that should be a civil right. Immigration polices that selectively grant freedom of movement to targeted individuals are intended to produce a net economic gain for the host country, but what about people from poor countries that are simply seeking better life opportunities?

The U.S. and Mexico border’s total length is 3,169 km (1,969 miles), according to figures given by the International Boundary and Water Commission. It is the most frequently crossed international border in the world, and this has allowed a deep archive of suspect movement across this border to be traced and tagged, mostly of immigrants moving north. The danger of moving north across this border is not a question of politics, but of vertiginous geography. The idea of using new technologies as communication tools was present in much of the avant-garde utopias of the 1960s and 1970s. Ugo La Pietra said about his project Casa Telematica:

... it becomes a center for gathering, processing and communicating information; a microstructure that can intervene in the information system by enlarging and multiplying exchanges among people, with everyone participating in the dynamics of communication.\(^8\)


The use of this dynamics of communication to help immigrants to cross the border between U.S. and Mexico can be one of the most powerful ways to revisit past utopias and bring them to the present. As Bertold Brecht wrote, “only the lessons of reality can teach us to transform reality.”9 Ricardo Dominguez uses GPS technology to develop Transborder Tools for Immigrants, and allow virtual geography to mark new trails and potentially safer routes across the desert. As described on the website, The Transborder Immigrant Tool would add a new layer of agency to the emerging virtual geography that would allow segments of global society that are usually outside of this emerging grid of hyper-geo-mapping-power to gain quick access to it with a GPS system.

We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors. We don’t know what to do with other worlds.10

If the sixties, the question of the radical nature of utopian architecture, and how can it be utopian — avoiding reality — and still be political, as Peggy Deamer pointed.11 One of the most interesting projects was to see if architecture can be helpful to avoid living in a non-place or in a heterotopia. It is possible that architecture transform this other world to mirrors where people can search for their own utopia? As Foucault said, “I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror. The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place.”12

We believe that utopias can also be more than an intellectual diverti
emento. Designer’s creativeness should also be oriented to address real challenges faced by humankind as a result of their economic and geopolitical relationships. Given that a world with no borders is still far away from our mental framework, why not get involved and provide solutions for this huge “mobile nation” of 191 millions of inhabitants? A giant mobile mirror reminding that all of us are also immigrants, passing through this life.

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12 Michel Foucault, Of Other Spaces, 1967. trans Jay Miskowiec..