

Utopian and Dystopian Visions in Landscape

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Keywords: Utopia, Dystopia, Landscape design

Abstract: To discuss the influence of utopian and dystopian visions in landscape and their relationship. The article also explore some future imaginaries of landscape towards today's problems.

1. Introduction

Utopia and dystopia are common themes in literature and film and television. It also deeply influenced the development of urban planning and landscape in the history. Utopia is a perfect community or society imagined by human that have a nearly perfect social, political and legal system. On the contrary, dystopia is a terrible society in people's imaginary. However, it may not be completely opposite of utopia, but negative perspective of the same society. A terrible future is projected in dystopia as the results of some events and activities at present. This essay will explain that utopian and dystopian visions work as a warning to existing problems, its benefits to real landscape, and its enlightenment to future landscape design. Three new landscape imaginaries for dealing with present problems will also be discussed in this essay.

2. Benefits of Utopian Visions in Landscape

Utopian vision enlightens the future landscape design, particularly in aspect of urban planning. Throughout the history of utopia, people's expectations are different in every time period and new utopian visions are proposed constantly according to contemporary situation over the time (Sargent, 2016). In addition, different people may have various utopian visions towards the same problem. Though many of them were never realized due to technical, material and some other difficulties, they truly provide some new thoughts in landscape design. For example, "utopia" proposed by Thomas More and "New Harmony" put forward by Robert Owen are utopian visions combining urban construction and social reconstruction creatively. These new ideas became the ideological origin of some later urban planning theories. Coincidentally, Ebenezer Howard proposed a new concept of urban planning in his book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* which described vision of human communities surrounded by fields and gardens and the areas of resident, industry and agriculture are in reasonable proportion. Many garden cities inspired by his model and have been built all over the world (Caves, 2014). Although his theory is not smooth in practice because many of these attempts were not real "garden cities" but a type of suburban communities, it still inspired many theories like "Satellite city" and "Theory of Organic Decentralization". Another example worth mentioning is "Green City" proposed by Le Corbusier who argued that cities should be built as

vertical green cities. Brasília planned by Lúcio Costa and factory town designed by František Lydie Gahura are both influenced this concept. And it is still evolving today.

3. Benefits of Dystopian Visions in Landscape

Dystopian vision urges landscape designers to deal with current problems. It usually reflects the contemporary problems of human society and gives out a worst imagine of the possible terrible future. Some dystopian visions concerning about environment come to appear in literature and films in recent years, showing the negative typicality of consequence of environmental destruction. “Environmental dystopia provides a cinematic means of recognizing and acknowledging audience fears and angst over not only the environmental degradation of the past, but the devastation anticipated in the future” (Moore et al., 2017). Dystopian could thus push people to take action and make changes. Actually, landscape architects are not always design the beautiful scenery, eliminate the ugliness and serve for the environmental protection. In order to save money and achieve profit maximization, people may tend to concentrate on developing productive and profitable industries, while the environmental problems are ignored. Dystopian vision, although sometimes exaggerated, satirizes the problem of reality and provides a negative example of environmental destruction, which may urge people to take action in landscape design.

Dystopian vision in landscape also promotes the communication between conceptual landscape and the material landscape. As Ujházy and Biró (2018) pointed out that “the exploration of dystopias highlights the cycles of feedback between material and conceptual landscape transformations”. A material landscape may different from its conceptual landscape through practice due to the weaknesses of materials, technology, geographical conditions, climatic conditions or other unpredictable factors. In this case, dystopia against this landscape design are likely to occur. Dystopian visions are usually proposed based on people's dissatisfaction with the reality of the landscape, reminding us the shortcomings and problems of current landscape. It also puts forward new requirements and imaginaries for the future development of material landscape, which stimulates the generation of new conceptual landscape and design ideas, thus promoting the changes of material landscape. The gap between material landscape and conceptual landscape makes new dystopia appear constantly and creates a good feedback circle between each other in the process of narrowing the gap. The same is true of utopian visions. Although utopia is regarded as a place that does not exist and utopian visions are thought to be impossible to be realized, people who take utopia seriously could still find plausible solutions to the current problems they confronted in their lives at the time (Sargent, 2016).

4. Negative Effect of Utopian and Dystopian Visions in Landscape

However, utopian and dystopian vision are not always beneficial to people in landscape designing. On the one hand, utopian visions make people eager to create an imagined perfect society, on the other hand, dystopian vision reflects the bad social situation and environmental problems, as well as the prediction of a terrible future, which stimulates people's desire to change the communities and control the environment. With the industrial revolution, many new materials such as reinforced concrete, iron and glass were invented. More materials and higher technology enable people to design and build freer architectures and urban spatial forms. In this period of time, many people's new imaginaries of future are new high-tech cities without backward tradition. In order to build highly functional and machine-like buildings and highly industrialized cities, people would require more new materials and technologies. Then, there may be “an increasing preoccupation with man’s ability to manipulate his environment and reply upon technological devices” (Sears, 1965). One example is Città Nuova (“New City”) designed by Antonio Sant’Elia.

This is a highly intensive and large-scale vertical city influenced by futurism. Skyscrapers in this high-tech city are connected by different corridors and vehicles such as bridges, skywalks and external elevator (Asim & Shree, 2018). This mechanized city is designed for a life that is always looking forward to the future. As a result, resources are consumed and people expect to master more resources. Landscape design would be ultimately constrained by limited space and resources.

5. New Landscape Imaginaries

When people are faced with the shortage of land, they will naturally seek for help in the space beyond their living circle. Therefore, many utopian visions have been putting forward like cities in the sky or cities in the sea. These utopian visions pay great attention to combining the plants and buildings, showing that environmental problems are attracting more and more attention. It is easily for people to develop the idea of constructing higher buildings for more living space like Skyscrapers. Unlike the futuristic architecture of the early 20th century, the sky city imaginaries of the 21st century emphasize more the combination of city and nature. An interesting case of sky city is futuristic “City in the Sky” by Hrama. The shape and implied meaning of it are inspired by biomimicry, taking the shape of the lotus flower as building form. It is much higher than the city below, with a high top above the stratosphere. The opening petals at the top provide an activity platform full of different kind of plants. This city imaginary aims to provide a tranquil oasis in crowded cities and noisy urban environment. Considering the shortage of land, energy, food, resources and effects of climate change, people also have some imaginaries about city above water because they don’t want to sacrifice farmland or nature. The “Floating Urbanization” programme by Karina Czapiewska suggested to build floating structures on water to gain new space for food production and urbanization. It is beneficial that the scale of floating structures could be easily controlled. And it would adapt to sea level rise. It is a possible solution to adapt to climate change. Fish are fed with algae, which is more efficient in floating city. What’s more, city’s waste such as carbon dioxide could be used as inputs to arrow algae and produce biofuel. Belgian architect Luc Schuiten also proposed a biomimetic approach to build cities which called “Vegetal Cities”. They are different from the “City in the Sky” though both of them adopt biomimetic way of designing. In “Vegetal Cities”, people are suggested to plant trees, guide their growth, prune and graft them into dwelling. They are no longer consumers, but the participants of a new ecosystem.

6. Conclusion

Utopian visions could inspire and guide the future designed landscape and landscape theories. Dystopian visions, on the one hand, make people realize the status quo and provide some imaginaries of the worst possibility of social development, ringing the alarm bell, urging people to take actions to prevent the real world from becoming a real dystopia. On the other hand, the exploration of dystopia promotes the virtuous cycle of material landscape and conceptual landscape and encourages the progress of creation of landscape design. However, utopian visions and dystopian visions may also lead to people's excessive dependence on high technology and people’s desire to master environment, thus resulting in the destruction of the environment in the creation of landscape design. This essay also suggests several new imaginaries against the major problems of the 21st century. Overall, both utopian visions and dystopian visions are reflections on contemporary social situation and environmental problems. Furthermore, they are forward-looking conceptual exploration for future urban construction and landscape design.

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