

Article

From Vision to Method: Situating Utopia in the 21st Century

Jana Čulek 

Faculty of Architecture, University of Zagreb, 26, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia; jculek@arhitekt.hr

Abstract

Recent transformations of utopia as a form can be followed from modernist totalizing grand narratives that depicted new socio-spatial orderings to its fragmentation, pluralization, and critical turn in the second half of the 20th century. But if we think about utopia as a critical form in our contemporary context, we often encounter it being perceived either as a pejorative term for a concept too outlandish and impossible to even be considered, or as a term used in conjunction with large-scale ideological projects which hold little regard for their socio-spatial context. Refusing to concede that utopia as a critical form has lost its relevance within the architectural discipline, the paper asks how contemporary utopian production could be identified, mapped, and interpreted after the fragmentation of modernist grand narratives. To that aim, the paper develops a three-axis analytical framework which observes contemporary forms of utopian architectural production. Viewing utopia not as a prescriptive image of an ideal future, but as a critical apparatus aimed at projection and inquiry, the framework maps utopian production according to its position between the possible and the impossible, the critical and the affirmative, and the uncovering and the projective. Building on the positions and relationships revealed through the structured three-axis framework, the paper constructs a typology of four ideal-typical protagonists: the Critical Thinker, the Speculative Designer, the Architect, and the Developer, demonstrating that contemporary utopian thought has not disappeared, but has dispersed across different forms of theory, speculative design, practice, and spatial production. Identifying through the four protagonists the potential of utopia not as a representational or prescriptive form, but rather as an operative strategy and a method of inquiry, the paper offers both a conceptual tool for analyzing architecture's contemporary engagement with utopia as a critical method, and demonstrates how utopian thinking operates as critique, intervention, ideological projection, and a speculative scenario building within our fragmented and individualized contemporary condition.

Keywords: utopia as method; analytical framework; utopian typology; speculative design; utopian architecture



Academic Editor: Tigran Haas

Received: 7 June 2026

Revised: 19 June 2026

Accepted: 22 June 2026

Published: 24 June 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

1. Introduction: Observing Utopia Today

Observing how utopia as a concept is perceived today, especially within the field of architecture, what it often relates to are images of ideal cities, modernist urban plans, and totalizing visions of alternative futures. But at the same time, utopia as a concept is equally associated with notions of impossibility, individual fantasy, and totalitarian ambitions. Much of this perception, however, remains shaped by a canon of modernist and renaissance projects, which were created under conditions and worldviews differing radically from our contemporary ones. As a result of this skewed lens of perception, utopia is today

often rejected as something which is either politically problematic or holds no practical or critical value.

But is it truly possible that a creative and critical form—which has for centuries been employed to envision different futures—has suddenly lost its potential and its role in architectural practice and our society? Or have we perhaps focused only on an outdated concept of what utopia used to be? Arguing that utopia has not yet exhausted its potential, but rather that it has undergone a gradual but persistent transformation, the main premise this paper starts from is not one of utopia's disappearance, but rather of the perceived inability of its contemporary interpretation and identification. In other words, the main challenge this paper aims to tackle is to uncover new methods for recognizing, observing, and tracing examples of contemporary utopian practice in and around architecture today.

Operating through more fragmented and dispersed modes of practice, research, and pedagogy, contemporary utopia has become increasingly difficult to recognize, signaling not the disappearance of utopian production, but rather our lack of an appropriate analytical apparatus through which we can identify it. To address this theoretical gap, this paper develops a three-axis analytical framework for identifying and interpreting contemporary forms of architectural utopian production. Examining utopia not as a prescriptive image of an ideal future, but as a critical method aimed at projection and inquiry, the framework maps utopian production according to its position between the possible and the impossible, the critical and the affirmative, and the uncovering and the projective. Emerging as a synthesis of many recurrent topics of utopian scholarship—namely those dealing with the realizability and ambition of utopian works, their critical positioning towards the status quo, and the level of projection which they offer—the axes provide a method for situating a diverse range of utopian practices within a common analytical space.

Using the developed analytical framework, the paper continues to construct a typology of four Weberian ideal-typical protagonists through which contemporary forms of utopian production can be both identified and interpreted. Together these four ideal-types—the Critical Thinker, the Speculative Designer, the Architect, and the Developer—represent four potential recurring modes through which utopian production operates across theory, speculative design, pedagogical practice, and spatial production. Intended here not as empirical categories, but rather as ideal-typical analytical constructs, the protagonists aim to accentuate the varying modes of contemporary utopian production, identifying the potential of utopia not just as a representational or prescriptive form, but rather as an operative strategy and a method of inquiry. The paper therefore offers both a conceptual tool for analyzing architecture's contemporary engagement with utopia as a critical method, and demonstrates how utopian thinking operates as critique, intervention, ideological projection, and speculative scenario-building.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Objectives, Scope, and Limitations

Acknowledging that the dispersal and fragmentation of utopian production has also inevitably led to its vast multiplication across various fields and modes of production, it must be stated that it is not the aim of this paper to provide an exhaustive empirical classification of all contemporary utopian forms and practices. Rather, its main objective is to offer an overarching methodology—which will be developed in the following sections of this paper as a three-axis analytical framework—in which various modes of contemporary utopian production could be situated, and through which they could be observed. Functioning as a heuristic tool, this three-axis framework is structured as a conceptual and interpretative device which aims to create analytical space through which recurring modes of contemporary utopian production can be identified and interpreted, following the

fragmentation and dispersal of modernist grand narratives. In addition to proposing the three-axis analytical framework, the paper also demonstrates the framework's applicability through both a calibration against canonical examples of utopian work, and its subsequent use in interpreting contemporary manifestations of utopian thought.

The developed three-axis analytical framework, which is derived from existing utopian scholarship and discourse and synthesizes recurring debates, is consequently demonstrated through a typology of four ideal-typical "protagonists" which emerged from it. Used as a method of structuring contemporary utopian production in and around architecture, the Critical Thinker, the Speculative Designer, the Architect, and the Developer operate as flexible nodes which accentuate constellations of similar utopian *modi operandi*. Limiting the study to the field of architecture and spatial production, including also theoretical production, speculative design, and pedagogical work, the paper reflects on the four emerging ideal-type protagonists, together with selected cases demonstrating them, in order to test the usefulness of the constructed framework in the context of contemporary utopian production. As such, the developed framework should be understood as an interpretative analytical device, whose value lies in facilitating the process of mapping, analysis, and comparison, rather than functioning as an empirical, predictive, or comprehensive classification system [Figure 1].

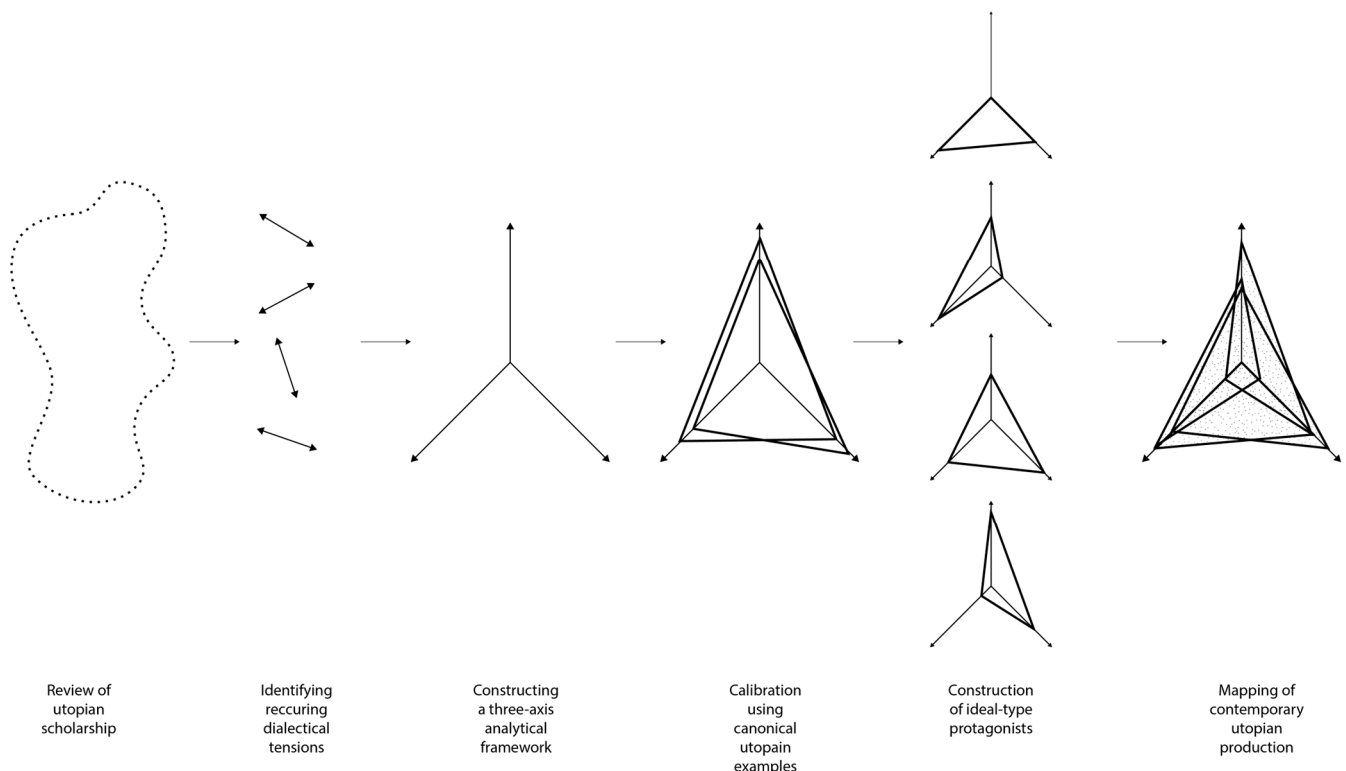


Figure 1. Research methodology, diagram by Jana Čulek.

2.2. Defining Utopia as a Critical Method

Before delving into the structure of the proposed three-axis analytical framework, it is relevant to establish how utopia is viewed in the context of this paper—namely as a critical method and not a finite narrative of an ideal alternative future. When approaching utopian scholarship, we can observe that it is common for texts which deal with utopia as a form, and which attempt to situate it within a larger frame of thought, to begin either from the concept's etymology [1–5] or its literary and/or architectural origins [4,6–10]. Given that the task of this paper is aimed less towards what utopia was and the numerous sub-concepts it encompasses, and more towards attempting to situate it within a contemporary

(architectural) context, the paper will draw from the scholarship of Nathaniel Coleman, Ruth Levitas, Fatima Viera, Frederic Jameson, and the Manuels, whose work focuses on framing utopia not as an individual's fantasy, but rather as a critical method [11] through which we simultaneously reflect on our present context, and propose its alternative. It is important to note, however, that when we look to this established scholarship, especially relating to architectural and urban planning utopian production, the readings, interpretations, etymologies, and directions which they discuss are mostly based on historical examples of utopian works up until the mid-20th century. Although the works of these authors provide us with valuable understanding and framing of utopia as a critical method, they suggest comparatively fewer tools applicable for systematically identifying and comparing contemporary utopian manifestations across varying fields and scales. Building on their notion of utopia as a critical method, and in consideration of its contemporary development, the following sections of this paper propose an analytical framework which emerges as an attempt to bridge this gap and which ultimately results in the identification of four ideal-typical protagonists, each representing a possible mode of contemporary utopian production.

2.3. Three-Axis Analytical Framework

The framework which the paper lays out in this section emerges as a synthesis of three most prominent recurring dialectical relationships which continuously reappear throughout utopian scholarship. Operating as a three-dimensional analytical system within which different forms of contemporary utopian production can be situated, it enables a process of identifying, framing, and mapping a constellation of contemporary utopian thought within the context of architecture, elucidating how it continues to be used as a critical method, what its potentials and limitations are, and how it manifests itself through different modes of architectural and spatial production. Structured as a coordinate system with three axes, each direction captures a recurring topic within utopian scholarship. The framework situates utopian production within the lines of (X) the possible and the impossible—addressing the relationship between utopian ambitions and its realizability; (Y) the critical and the affirmative—situating utopian production based on its stance towards existing socio-spatial conditions and systems of power; and lastly (Z) uncovering and projecting—distinguishing between practices whose aim is to merely diagnose present conditions, as opposed to those which propose alternative futures [Figure 2].

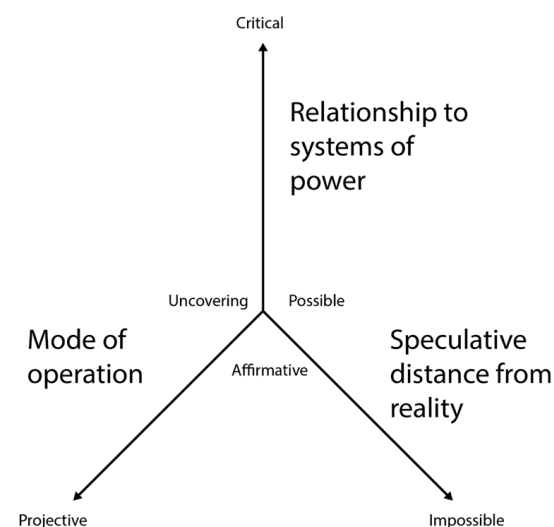


Figure 2. Three-directional coordinate system and their role, diagram by Jana Čulek.

2.3.1. Axis X—Possible to Impossible: Defining the Speculative Distance from Reality

The possible/impossible axis defines the relationship of a utopian narrative or project to a given present reality and its potential future developments: the degree of its speculative distance from existing socio-spatial realities. It is perhaps most easily visually described using the “futures cone”¹ [Figure 3], in which utopia would be positioned somewhere towards the edge between the possible and the impossible, but strongly outside of what would be considered probable. As Gregory Claeys proposes, utopia “is not in the domain of the impossible”, but rather “explores the space between the possible and the impossible” [12]. It should never be so easily attainable that we could imagine its immediate realization, but also not so abstract, fictional, or unrelated to a current lived reality that we can no longer identify with any of its speculative aspects. Not crossing the edge of impossibility, utopia retains its role as a horizon towards which we continuously strive and does not traverse into the realm of fantasy and fiction. This position between the possible and the impossible is also one which Louis Marin refers to as the “neutral”, which he describes as “neither yes nor no, true nor false, one nor the other”, and as a “span between true and false” [13], while a relatable literary analogy could perhaps position a historical or biographic novel on the side of the possible, and science fiction as the edge condition of the impossible.

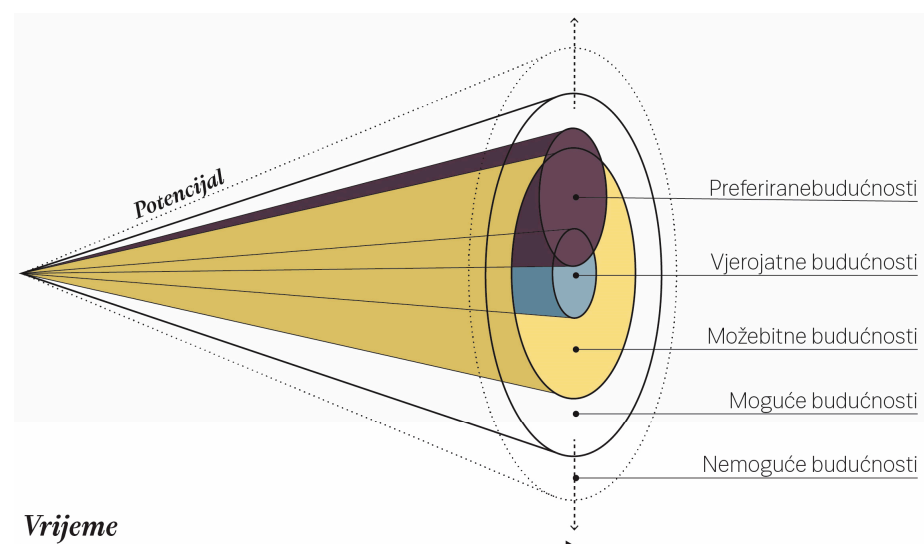


Figure 3. Voros' Futures cone, redrawn by Jana Čulek.

2.3.2. Axis Y—Critical to Affirmative: Defining the Relationship to Systems of Power

The directions of the critical/affirmative axis are related to a specific way of positioning towards a given contextual and historical present and dominant systems of power, namely whether the utopian narrative questions and opposes or promotes and strengthens them. The position therefore varies from one of affirmation, encouragement, and strengthening of a status quo, to one of its critical questioning and reconstitution. An example of this differentiation within a utopian-adjacent context is the two different types of ideal cities defined by Ruth Eaton, namely those which are *reactive*, and “where the city is ‘adjusted’ to reflect an established social order” [10], as opposed to those which she deems *proactive* and propose a new type of social order. She notes that the differentiation is also akin to that identified by Karl Mannheim, differentiating the concept of ideology and utopia in which the former signifies “those political ideas which are sustained by the system and power”, and the latter “those which are in opposition to it” [10]. As an example of a proactive city model Eaton identifies the “Italian Quattrocento schemes, which propose a framework for the Renaissance power structure in contrast to the existing medieval city” [10], as opposed

to examples such as Ebenezer Howard's Garden City model in which "novel physical conditions are designed to bring about social change" [10], and whose socio-spatial designs were based on ideas which were diametrically opposite to the established conditions of their time. It is important to note, however, that within the context of this axis, the distinction is not one of utopian and non-utopian, but rather that of the narrative's alignment to established systems of power. This is because regardless of the position in this particular axis, the assumption remains that in both cases a vision of an alternative future was already proposed, regardless of its ideological background.

2.3.3. Axis Z—Uncovering to Projective: Defining the Mode of Operation

Lastly, the uncovering/projective axis defines the outcome of a design endeavor based on its mode of operation, namely if utopian production is primarily concerned with diagnosing and revealing specific existing socio-spatial conditions, or if it structures and proposes alternative futures. The closest correlation that could describe these two poles is the two of the three modes of "utopia as method" proposed by Ruth Levitas, namely "utopia as archeology", "utopia as ontology", and "utopia as architecture" [2]. Focusing in the context of this paper more on the differentiation between the archeological and architectural mode, she defines the former as the "piecing together [of] the images of the good society that are embedded in political programs and social and economic policies", while the latter—"architectural mode"—is that of "the imagination of potential alternative scenarios for the future, acknowledging the assumptions about and consequences for the people who might inhabit them" [2]. Within the "archaeological" mode, which as a concept is later also adopted by Frederic Jameson², the use of utopia as a method focuses on uncovering the utopian aspects of already existing social and political structures. Darren Webb³ also offers outlines of utopian production on which he critically reflects, namely "two concepts of utopia, 'utopia-as-process' and 'utopia-as-system'" [14] in which the former employs the function of "critical demystification—uncovering, unveiling, unmasking the operation of power so that new open, partial, fluid, spaces of possibility can emerge", while the latter is most commonly seen only as "utopia as prescription" [14]. In other words, it is a process of uncovering which only operates as the restructuring of what is already there, with bringing to view what has not been seen, but without fully developing a narrative of an alternative future. Within this context utopia becomes a tool for questioning, critical reading, and the opening-up of new perspectives without the necessity of providing specific or depictable answers. Utopia as architecture, on the other hand, is the more familiar mode of utopia in which the "imagining [of] a reconstructed world and [the] describing [of] its social institutions" [2] take place, creating a describable and drawable projective model—or design—of an alternative world or future.

2.4. Calibrating the Three-Axis Framework Through Canonical Examples

To create a benchmark against which the contemporary modes of utopian can be compared, this section will quickly demonstrate the positioning of three canonical architectural examples—namely Ebenezer Howard's Garden City [15] model, Ludwig Hilberseimer's *Grossstadt Architektur* [16], and Superstudio's 12 Ideal Cities [17]—along the three defined axes. Rather than analyzing different formative aspects of their narratives, the three examples are used to calibrate the proposed analytical framework by demonstrating the positions that widely recognized utopian works occupy within the proposed three-dimensional coordinate system. The works were, therefore, chosen as examples because all three are commonly known and accepted examples of utopian architectural production which were created within roughly the 20th century and demonstrate a modern evolution of utopian

thought and format, from more totalizing depictions of new cities and ways of life with Howard and Hilberseimer, towards a more critical stance visible in the work of Superstudio.

As represented in the graphs [Figure 4], although with some minor differences, all three examples gravitate strongly towards the outer edges of the axes. The works are more critical than affirmative, they move more towards the impossible, and they all conclude with producing projective models instead of remaining in the process of uncovering. Howard develops his Garden City model from a historical condition of emerging industrialization and the social and spatial consequences related to it, such as a large migration of people from rural to urban areas, focusing predominantly on the worsening conditions of the working class. Positioning himself against the dominant bourgeoisie, he proposes a model of the Garden City which, through its layout, programmatic zoning, and innovative financing model, aims to ease the problems of the working class, providing them with a clean and affordable place for living and working. Hilberseimer addressed the development and growth of mass production and its consequences on the European metropolis, both on the spatial and societal level. Siding, like Howard, with the working and migrating individual, he positions his proposal as a critique of the densifying and cacophonous conditions of European capitals and proposes what he deems a more appropriate city and living model for the emerging metropolitan man. And lastly, Superstudio positions itself critically against consumerism as the growing driving force of their society and strives to eliminate the object, the concept of work, and consequently the city as manifestations of the capitalist systems. Through twelve separate visual and textual narratives, they develop radical developments of urban planning tropes with the aim of creating both shock and discourse. These canonical examples therefore suggest that much of utopian production of the early 20th century, which was characterized predominantly by totalizing grand narratives, leans towards the production of critical, projective, and speculative positions approaching the threshold of the impossible. The main differences that occur in the three works partly stem from their overall intentions. Howard's Garden City model gravitates less strongly towards the impossible, given that his aim was one of realization. Hilberseimer's model is perhaps least overtly critical of the three, given that his work develops directly from the emerging industrial modes of work and production, embracing these conditions rather than rejecting them. Lastly, Superstudio's work is perhaps least projective, given that the aim of the narratives is more geared towards making certain conditions visible, intensifying them through their narratives without necessarily developing their alternatives.

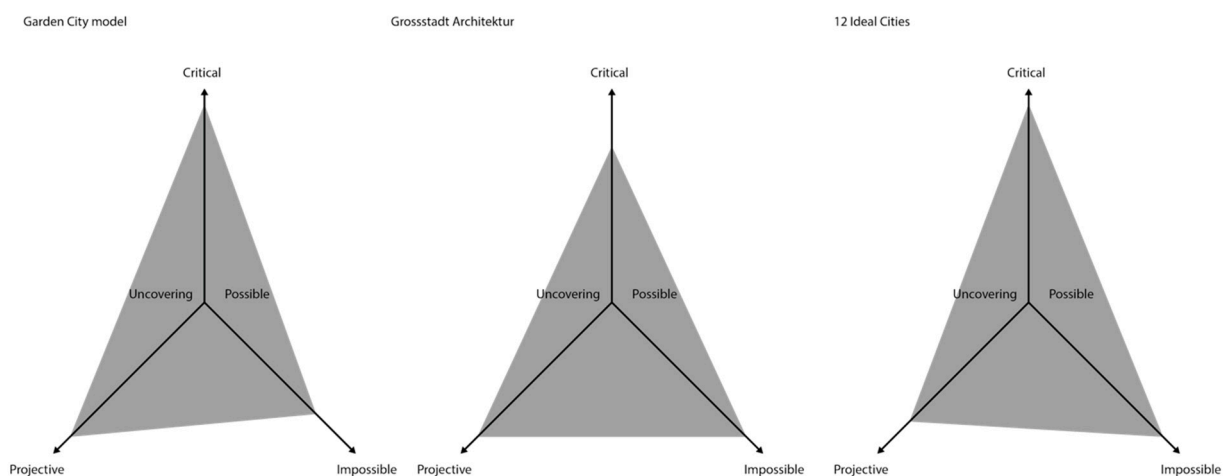


Figure 4. Position of canonical utopian projects in a three-directional coordinate system, diagram by Jana Čulek.

Situating the three canonical examples within the proposed three-axis framework demonstrates the framework's rootedness in already existing utopian scholarship and examples, proposing it as a useful tool for identifying and analyzing contemporary forms of utopian production, which do not fall as neatly into the same positions and rarely appear in such readily identifiable forms, but can still be viewed through the same overarching categories. The following sections of the paper will therefore turn towards demonstrating a set of ideal-typical protagonists which emerge from the framework, and through which the contemporary dispersed manifestations of utopian production can be mapped and interpreted.

3. Results: Constructing Ideal-Typical Utopian Protagonists

After establishing a three-axis analytical framework for the identification and observation of contemporary utopian production, looking specifically at architecture and adjacent fields, and after demonstrating the framework through the use of canonical examples of 20th-century utopian architectural production, the following sections of the paper will introduce the four ideal-type protagonists which emerge from it, and occupy a specific context within contemporary utopian production.

Before delving into the protagonists, it is important to note that following Weber's concept of the "ideal-type" [18], they should in no way be understood as empirically existing actors, but rather as analytical constructs or points of reference to which we can compare and "make the characteristic features" of an observed phenomenon's relationship with reality "pragmatically clear and understandable" [18]. In other words, both the ideal-type as an analytical construct, and the protagonists which emerge from the structured three-axis analytical framework are "mental constructs" which "cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality" [18]. As Weber proposes, "the construction of abstract ideal-types recommends itself not as an end but as a means" [18]. As such, their role is one of analytical "utopias" which aim to accentuate specific tendencies to allow for the interpretation of complex cultural phenomena and modes of contemporary utopian production.

Consequently, within the constructed analytical space, four recurring constellations⁴ of ideal-typical utopian protagonists are identified, each making evident a specific standpoint and manifestation of utopian production within the contemporary context. Operating within their own theoretical, political, cultural, and historical milieu, each protagonist reflects a recurring frame of thought, can be illustrated through an array of examples, and is based on a specific set of goals and ambitions.

While each of these protagonists signifies a specific correlation of points within the set three-axis framework, spanning the principal regions of the analytical space generated by the coordinate system, they do not represent exhaustive categories of contemporary utopian thought, but rather map recurring configurations. The protagonists have not necessarily developed as a product of a specific historical continuity; they are neither inherently positive or negative and do not emerge from the same disciplines. However, they are all in some way engaged with the topics of space, society, and the interdependence of the two. They are (1) the Critical Thinker, (2) the Speculative Designer, (3) the Architect, and (4) the Developer. Each of the ideal-typical protagonists is related to utopia as a method, but is situated in different positions along the three predefined axes, uncovering through it both their complex relationship to utopia as a method, and their potential for utopian thought.

Before examining each ideal-type protagonist in detail, it is important to note that they do not correspond to disciplinary categories. Their distinctions are not based on a specific scientific or professional field, but on the mode through which utopian production is pursued—all within the larger framework of the architectural discipline and spatial

production. An architect can therefore operate either as a Critical Thinker, Speculative Designer, Architect, or Developer, each time accentuating a different relationship to critique, projection, realization, and overall socio-spatial transformation.

3.1. *The Critical Thinker: Employing Critique Through Critique*

The first protagonist, and one which is most relevant for mapping a theoretical framework for contemporary utopian production, is the Critical Thinker. Within the constructed three-axis analytical framework, this ideal-type occupies a strong critical and uncovering position, while balancing on the line between the possible and the impossible. Emerging from the field of critical theory but observed in a context which is wider than its mere philosophical underpinning of the Frankfurt School of thought, this protagonist employs a multi- or interdisciplinary approach to theorization which emerges from the humanities fields into various creative professions and avenues. Within a wider context, the Critical Thinker observes ideologies and the structures of power which are the bases of our society. However, their goal is not the mere observation of these concepts and structures. They rather move several steps ahead and engage with a more active role in the uncovering of problematic conditions and systems, sometimes even to the extent of proposing alterations to the status quo.

In its theoretical lineage, this protagonist embodies thinkers and utopian scholars such as Frederic Jameson [19] and Ruth Levitas [1,2]. Jameson begins his seminal *Archaeologies* book with a reading that reflects on the notion that in the second half of the 20th century utopia has “come to designate a program which neglected human frailty”, and “betrayed a will to uniformity and the ideal purity of a perfect system that always had to be imposed by force on its imperfect and reluctant subjects” [19], also mirroring the sentiment Webb describes as “the indignity of speaking for others” [14]. In other words, the time of utopias which proposed overarching socio-spatial narratives has ended—a condition which in most of the utopian literature is related to the atrocities of the Second World War as well as the failure of the Modernist project. Jameson, however, also adds to this his reading of a seemingly “invincible universality of capitalism” and what he describes as a “crippling universal belief” that the tendencies of capitalism are “irreversible” and the fact that the “historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available” [19]. And while this attitude does indeed shift the format of utopia within the context of the second half of the twentieth century, Jameson does not reject it as a useful tool but rather differentiates “two distinct lines of descent from More’s inaugural text”—the “utopian program” and the “utopian impulse” [19].

While the “utopian program” encompasses the traditional utopian model which proposes an overarching socio-spatial narrative, the “utopia as impulse” is more akin to Ernest Bloch’s *Principle of Hope*, as well as both the ontological and archeological *utopia as method* defined by Ruth Levitas [2]. Levitas describes utopia-as-ontology as a specific way of thinking and living, as well as of perceiving the world in which our own human nature should—in theory—always push us to strive towards betterment and perfection, while she states that:

“Archaeology undertakes excavations and reconstructions of both artefacts or cultures, based on a mixture of evidence, deduction and imagination, representing as whole something of which only shards and fragments remain. Where images of the good society are buried and denied, they are rendered partial and fragmentary. Utopia as archaeology entails the imaginary reconstitution of the models of the good society underpinning policy, politics and culture, exposing them to scrutiny and critique.” [2]

With these approaches, utopia becomes less a finished image of a future society, world, or space, and more a fundamental and hopeful orientation towards possibility, paired with a critical reading and understanding of the present context. Within this condition, the Critical Thinker in its constructed analytical space engages with utopia as a method of uncovering, of testing, and of questioning, but without prescribing. They acknowledge the historical exhaustion of universal and totalizing narratives as well as the potential violence implicit in “speaking for others”. At the same time, they still engage with utopia, but as a method and not as a dogma. The process of the Critical Thinker is therefore one of uncovering latent models of a better society, questioning the assumptions embedded in present arrangements and conditions, but still experimenting with forms of projection that do not enclose one single and/or overarching narrative.

3.1.1. Examples of Critical Thinkers

An interesting speculative and projective example of a Critical Thinker which does not stem from the architectural field is the *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* book by Peter Frase [20]. In it, Frase builds four speculative scenarios of a future without capitalism, which he builds on the assumption that the problem of work and production—one which is most often cited as perhaps the biggest hurdle to be overcome in any such speculative narrative—has been overcome. He states that “this can be done simply by extrapolating capitalism’s tendency toward ever-increasing automation, which makes production ever-more efficient while simultaneously challenging the system’s ability to create jobs, and therefore to sustain demand for what is produced” [20]. In his work, Frase proposes four future scenarios which evolve as a combination of two main topics—resources and social organization—the first manifesting itself either as abundance or scarcity, and the second as equality and hierarchy. And while Frase does indeed propose speculative scenarios, they are not constructed as totalizing socio-spatial narratives which would be akin to “traditional” utopian works. Rather, he uncovers and rearranges already existing conditions, creating four discursive potentials for different kinds of futures which emerge from different aspects of our own present. He reserves any type of preference for either of the scenarios, stating merely that “with some knowledge of what lies at the end of each road, perhaps we will be better able to avoid setting off in the wrong direction” [20].

When observing examples of Critical Thinkers in the contemporary architectural field, one which is particularly relevant in this context is *Terra Forma: A Book of Speculative Maps* by Frederique Ait-Touati, Alexandra Arenes, and Axelle Gregoire [21]. In the book, the authors develop a novel cartographic method through which they depict the known world, but through so far unused methods and categories. It is used as an example for the Critical Thinker protagonist because the work simultaneously uncovers previously unknown or unseen aspects of our world and creates connections and correlations which have not yet been made. Through this new ordering, positioning, and making visible, the work provides a completely novel insight and reading, as well as a speculative visual depiction of the different biogenic and anthropomorphic layers of our planet, its inhabitants, and numerous interdependent systems. Experimenting with scales, points of view, and modes of drawing, the work also uses speculation to make more apparent and understandable some of the intricate correlations of different mapped entities. And while it does not produce any type of formal speculative or utopian scenario, it does fully reposition the viewer, allowing them to perceive the world around us in a completely different manner.

3.1.2. Critical Thinker Graph

The discussed examples of the Critical Thinker [Figure 5] depict a mode of utopian production which focuses more on the process of critique and uncovering than on creating

comprehensive alternative scenarios. Rather than constructing new worlds, the space this protagonist occupies is reserved for the processes of rearrangement, excavation, and making visible all the latent possibilities present in our existing contexts. Within the defined three-axis analytical framework, the position of the Critical Thinker is therefore as follows: in the critical/affirmative axis, their position leans strongly towards the critical end of the spectrum—they question the status quo, uncover ideological constructs and challenge systems of power. On the uncovering/projective axis they lean much more towards uncovering, which reflects their reluctance to create any type of totalizing utopian models. And lastly, on the possible/impossible axis the Critical Thinker positions themselves somewhere in the mid-line, leaning slightly more towards the impossible. While this protagonist does not indeed introduce any type of novel forms of utopian spaces or societies, they do in fact engage with different processes of speculative reconstitution and rearrangement of aspects which are already there, with the aim of making things evident which have perhaps been overlooked.

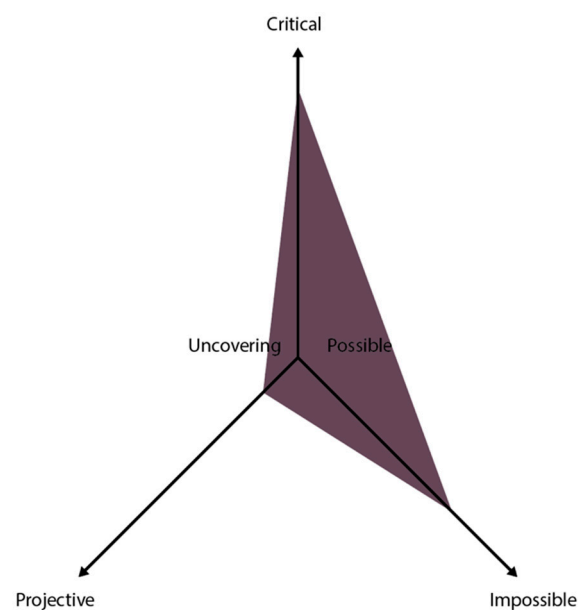


Figure 5. Positioning of the Critical Thinker, diagram by Jana Čulek.

3.2. The Speculative Designer: Employing Critique Through Speculation

The position occupied by the Speculative Designer, like that of the Critical Thinker, uses design-driven methods to make evident certain conditions of our contextual present. But unlike the Critical Thinker, which often remains within a discursive and rhetorical level, the Speculative Designer leans towards propositional speculation. This protagonist is perhaps the closest “relative” to the historical utopians and is also related to the numerous “paper architecture”⁵ projects of the second half of the 20th century. But regardless of the strong ties this protagonist holds to traditional projective utopian narratives, the scenarios they create are not primarily concerned with constructing comprehensive socio-spatial systems but rather with using them as tools for critical reflection. In other words, the process of speculative design is used as a means for critically reflecting on the status quo.

Observing its historical lineage, the Speculative Designer is strongly related to the concepts of anti-utopia and critical utopia, which emerged in the second half of the 20th century, and which have not only critically questioned their historical conditions but also explored the possibilities and potentials of utopia as a method and/or model. Moving away from a purely rhetorical and discursive level on which the Critical Thinker operates and emerging as a response to the crisis of modernist grand narratives, the Speculative

Designer aims to test their hypotheses and critical positions directly through designs, projects, and scenarios.

Exploring speculative design as a field, authors Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, in their work *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*, state that perhaps the main goal in creating speculative scenarios of different futures lies not in the futures themselves, but rather in the better understanding of the present [22]. Consequently, the goal of the Speculative Designer becomes not that of envisioning realizable future scenarios, societies, and spaces towards which we should strive, but rather of triggering a discourse, asking new questions, and creating—through design—provocations of our status quo. They state that:

“Designers should not define futures for everyone else but working with experts, including ethicists, political scientists, economists, and so on, generate futures that act as catalysts for public debate and discussion about the kinds of futures people really want.” [22]

Dunne and Raby also refer to Voros’ “Futures Cone”, situating speculative design, projects and scenarios precisely in the area between the plausible and the limit of the impossible, for which they consider that in today’s context includes merely “perpetual motion and precognition” [22]. Conversely, all other changes and modifications are—at least in theory—within the realm of the possible and plausible and should therefore be speculated upon. However, Dunne and Raby stress that in the context of speculative scenarios—similarly to that of utopia—“there should be a path from where we are today to where we are in the scenario”, noting that “a believable series of events that led to the new situation is necessary, even if entirely fictional” [22]. Speculative scenarios cannot therefore be so far away from their present condition that it is impossible for us to even devise ways of our path towards them. If this connection is not visible, we move to the sphere of fantasy and lose any and all critical potential.

3.2.1. Examples of Speculative Designers

The Speculative Designer as an ideal-type follows the historical lineage of work produced by Superstudio, Archigram, Archizoom, and some early works of OMA, many of which are also on the edge of what is still considered examples of utopian projects. In today’s context, some of the more prominent examples from architecture in this category include the now already large opus of work from the Design Earth studio run by Rania Goshn and El Hady Jazairy. Most of their speculative scenarios were created through the format of architectural exhibitions, most commonly through the various biennials and triennials. These large-scale public settings play a key role in setting the stage for employing the discursive aspects of their speculative scenarios due both to the specific thematic lines which they commonly explore and the high concentration of professional public which often actively engages with the presented projects.

The works of Design Earth are often developed on a very large—sometimes even planetary or interplanetary scale—and address topics of planetary systems and interventions, playing out their potential consequences and development scenarios through graphic and textual narratives. An interesting example of their work in this context is “The Planet After Geoengineering”, developed for the Venice Architecture Biennale of 2021. The project follows five thematic narratives, each focusing on one zone of Earth’s sectional depth, developing scenarios for the potential repercussions of geoengineering. As explained by the authors:

“Each geostory—Petrified Carbon, Arctic Albedo, Sky River, Sulphur Storm, and Dust Cloud—depicts possible future Earths that we come to inhabit on the heels of a geoengineering intervention all while situating such promissory

visions within a genealogy of climate-control projects form nineteenth-century rainmaking machines and volcanic eruptions to Cold War military plans.” [23]

They continue to explain that this approach creates “a space to forge a new geopolitics that includes the actual Earth [...] as a constitutive of design and the planet” [23]. The project perfectly exemplifies the use of speculative design as a means of critically interrogating present conditions, and what Dunne and Raby describe as the opening-up of space for discussion through speculative design.

A second example relevant for this section is the earlier speculative works of Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara’s office Dogma. One of the more interesting examples is the project “Stop City” from 2007, which investigates the concept of limits, both in their physical and conceptual aspects, questioning the limits of the city, its development, as well as the spatial and conceptual limits of capitalism as a force which has an undeniably large effect on the (un)built environment. In the project’s text the authors state that:

“Here, the idea of limit refers to both the physical space established within those constraints set up to curtail the endless growth of the city, and also, in more conceptual terms, to the idea that architecture should turn its back on the imperative and drama for newness and instead define prototypical forms of density: i.e., spaces for living and working that counteract the individualism and laissez-faire governance promoted by neoliberal politics.” [24]

By creating simple spatial forms—limits—the authors create a city whose spatial growth and development is limited in all directions but the vertical. Using an intentionally simplified spatial form, the project simultaneously imagines an alternative spatial logic and critically reflects on architectural and urban planning production within the neoliberal and capitalist context, and architecture which is led by the production image, trend, extravagance and form, questioning through this the very position of the discipline in today’s context.

3.2.2. Speculative Designer Graph

The Speculative Designer [Figure 6] is positioned on the three-axis analytical framework as follows. On the uncovering/projective axis, this protagonist leans much more heavily towards the projective end than the Critical Thinker because the end goal is indeed the creation of some kind of speculative scenario. It is not however positioned all the way towards the edge of the projective because the proposed scenarios do not necessarily offer totalizing and prescriptive narratives of potential futures but rather develop in more detail specific aspects of them. In the spectrum between the possible and the impossible, the Speculative Designer also leans far more towards the impossible than the Critical Thinker, precisely because the goal of this protagonist is to move away from the most probable futures towards more radical and speculative ones. And lastly, on the critical/affirmative axis, this protagonist situates itself somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, but perhaps only seemingly. Given that the outcomes produced by this protagonist include scenarios that could be deemed as both positive and negative, sometimes it is precisely this seemingly affirmative positioning towards the status quo that allows for the creation of the speculative scenario that exposes certain issues with an existing system, context, or ideology. Therefore, even though the process of the Speculative Designer is critical and not affirmative by nature, the speculative scenarios themselves have sometimes evolved through the process of radical affirmation and radicalization of existing conditions to point more easily to their inherent issues.

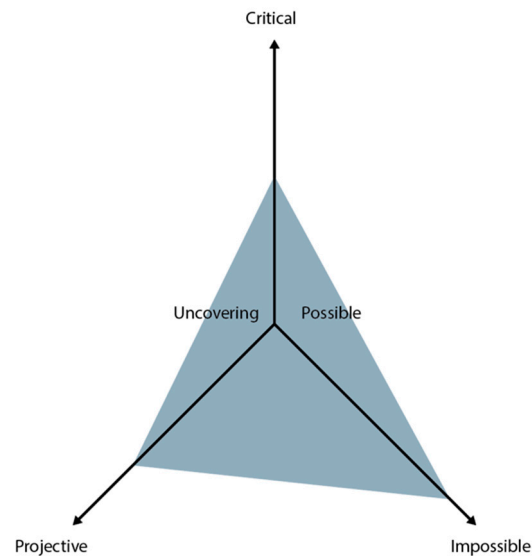


Figure 6. Positioning of the Speculative Designer, diagram by Jana Čulek.

3.3. The Architect: Employing Critique Through Intervention

The ideal-type of the Architect, as understood within the framework of this paper, does not represent the whole of architecture as a discipline, but rather a specific mode of architectural practice which seeks to produce socio-spatial change through realizable physical interventions. While the first two ideal-type protagonists situated themselves much more visibly within the analytical field of speculation, the third protagonist—the Architect—due precisely to this imperative of realization, operates from a more reality-based condition within which it must negotiate. This protagonist is also the most difficult to pin down in relation to its utopian ambitions, potentials, and actual production. A hypothesis which commonly arises within architectural discourse, especially in discussions revolving around utopia, is that of architecture being innately utopian, given that it always produces future-based scenarios which intend to achieve some kind of improvement to the status quo. However, not all architecture is utopian merely because it projects future conditions. Borrowing an explanation from Gem Barton’s lecture on Worldbuilding Pedagogies:

“...in the context of critical design theory, ‘speculative’ [or in this case even utopian] isn’t shorthand for ‘unbuilt’ or ‘future-set’. It names a method: using design deliberately to surface assumptions, generate critique, and make emerging conditions debatable.” [25]

From an architectural perspective, a relevant theoretical framing is offered by Nathaniel Coleman, focusing less on utopian architecture and more on a utopian strive found in architectural projects of different scales and functions. He relates utopia to the intrinsic drive of architecture rather than its manifestation. In his book *Utopia and Architecture*, Coleman proposes that both utopia and architecture are “the result of a belief that what could be, or ought to be is superior to what is” [26]. He also states that “architectural designs, like fictions, are the making of an imaginary realm”, but “architecture is profoundest when an architect’s invention advances a commentary on the social activities it will house, as they are lived and as they might be lived”, which positions architecture “between conservation of what is and proposition of improved future conditions” [26], which bears a strong resemblance to the impetus of utopia. However, in his text “The Problematic of Architecture and Utopia” he proposes to view architectural projects not as being utopian per se, but rather as having “utopian potential” or a “utopian dimension” [27]. This position is akin to those of both Jameson’s utopian impulse and Levitas’ utopia as ontology that was discussed earlier in the text, in which architecture no longer takes on the prescriptive or

performative utopian role, but rather serves as an instrument of questioning and making things evident, while being based on an innate human desire of striving for a more perfect society and world. Coleman does, however, offer a somewhat precise definition which would allow us to differentiate the architectures which do indeed strive more towards the utopian, as opposed to those which do not, namely containing:

“... social and political content; a significant level of detail in the description of what is proposed; elaboration of a positive transformation of social and political life as key to what is proposed or constructed; and, not least—ethical or aesthetic—critique of the present informed by a critical historical perspective.” [27]

In other words, to contain within itself a utopian impulse or intention—even in the context of individual buildings—architecture needs to take on a political position which, along with the spatial intervention, holds in itself a critical reflection on the current condition together with a positive vision of a future transformation. The Architect therefore enters the three-axis framework at a point when architecture ceases to be merely construction but rather becomes a vehicle for critique and socio-spatial transformation.

3.3.1. Examples of the Architect

The specific examples that are used to depict this protagonist are contemporary architectural examples, created by a younger generation of architects, of a smaller scale, and often self-initiated and therefore created outside of the standard framework of client requirements and limitations. But what is perhaps most relevant is that both examples combine spatial intervention with social transformation, which is perhaps most relevant in this context as it holds the key to their utopian impulse.

The first example is the Luchtsingel bridge in Rotterdam⁶, designed by ZUS [28] in 2015 and realized through a crowdfunding initiative. It was built both as a physical connection between three Rotterdam neighborhoods previously separated by the railway, and as an activation trigger for the adjacent Schieblock—an urban office block which has been largely abandoned or underused since the 2011 financial crisis. While the project of the bridge itself is both visually and spatially attractive, what was most relevant in the project was its overall positive societal impact on the surrounding area. Linking both physically and experientially this previously separated Rotterdam area, the project was a catalyst for the creation of new public, collective and commercial functions and has resulted in the actual comprehensive activation of the entire Schieblock, making it one of the larger creative hubs of the city.

The other example is the series of play-based projects by the UK-based collective Assemble, such as the Baltic Street Adventure Playground, Big Slide or Play KX. Although many of the projects by the collective has a strongly developed social component, are often created in close collaboration with local communities, and as such successfully serve as non-market-driven activating catalysts for previously underused areas, the projects which they develop which revolve around the topic of child’s play perhaps have the most evident utopian impulse through opening up questions around the freedom and function of use in public spaces. The approach to many of their play-related projects is similar—using a minimally necessary amount of building materials, and by recycling existing elements, along with creating a potential for play and non-scripted use within urban public spaces. What they actually achieve is to reclaim public space and challenge standard ways of use through creating alternative forms for collective life.

3.3.2. Architect Graph

It is relevant to note at this point that the positioning on the graph [Figure 7] does not reflect all architectural production and projects in general, but rather those projects which do

contain a utopian impulse. On the possible/impossible axis, out of the four protagonists, the Architect is positioned most towards the possible edge of the spectrum, due to its assumed intention of realization. On the uncovering/projective axis, the position of traditional architecture practice would be clearly situated towards the projective, given that distinct and precise steps, ideas, structures are put forth, again with the aim of realization. However, within the context of this specific ideal-type protagonist, which represents a specific mode of architectural production that contains a utopian impulse, the position of the Architect changes. The hypothesis in this case is that architecture, to retain some kind of utopian potential, needs to have the ability to open up discourse, to start conversations, and to point to issues, all of which lie in the domain of the uncovering edge of the spectrum more than the projective one. For that reason, the position of this protagonist on the uncovering/projective scale is somewhere along the middle of this axis, which enables both the critical inquiry and the projective aspect of the work. And lastly, the position of the Architect on the critical/affirmative axis is also specific here because it is a position that clearly delineates architectural production with a utopian impulse from the one without it. On the one hand, due to its intention of realization and physical embodiment, architecture predominantly must find ways to compromise. It needs to enter a dialogue with the present reality and accept some limitations, which positions it more towards the affirmative edge of the spectrum. Yet this tendency to compromise does not eliminate the Architect's critical capacity. If we observe the Architect through the lens of this analytical framework and assume we are observing only those examples which do indeed have a utopian impulse, and which aim to critically engage with the status quo through their interventions, this protagonist needs to strive towards the critical edge of the axis. Consequently, this ideal-typical protagonist is positioned somewhere on the center of the critical/affirmative axis, leaning towards the critical while remaining engaged with existing economic, political, and socio-spatial realities.

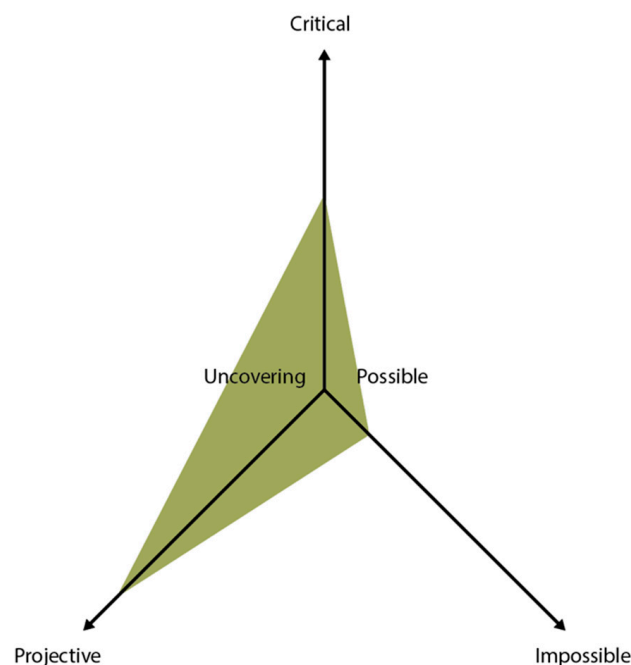


Figure 7. Positioning of the Architect, diagram by Jana Čulek.

3.4. The Developer: The Absence of Critique

The final protagonist that emerges from the three-axis analytical framework, and one which occupies perhaps the most controversial position, is the Developer. The purpose of including the Developer as an ideal-type within this framework is twofold. Firstly, it is

used to test the limits of the framework itself, exposing potentially negative aspects of what could be considered contemporary utopian production, and secondly it is used to showcase this protagonist's engagement with utopian discourse, which is in many ways only nominal, using some of utopia's mechanisms while abandoning its critical function. Occupying the same formal territory as future projection, but with a reversal of its critical orientation, the Developer embodies a narrative in which the goal of utopia is switched from that of a critical mirror of the present society to that of enforcing the dominant ideology and systems of power. It becomes a grand narrative for the reproduction of the capitalist (or any other established) system and its underlying ideological apparatus. This differentiation can also be related back to the "reactive" versus "proactive" ideal city as defined by Ruth Eaton, with the focus now being on the "reactive" ones. Employing the fictional and future-facing narrative methods of utopia, but without its criticality, the utopias produced under the Developer ideal-type do not offer an alternative to our present condition but rather perpetuate some of its main hallmarks, creating a state of permanent present.

As D. R. Ford and M. Svensson propose in their text "Still-existing utopian pedagogy: Architecture, curriculum, and the revolutionary imaginary":

"The potential for global revolutionary transformations that fundamentally alter our social relations and beings—in the future and the present—is configured as nonsense by capital's perceptual ideological networks." [29]

They continue to refer to the concept of the "permanent presence of the same" [29], in which "our disoriented temporality [is located] in the gap between 'a catastrophic reality and the absence of a pathway out' which produces 'a historical mode of spatiotemporal abstract, reification, and dislocation'" [29]. This disorientation in turn positions us in what they refer to as "a prison-like present that seemingly will never permit our freedom" [29]. And it is precisely within this permanent condition of a perpetuating present in which the Developer utopia begins to take shape. While the Developer as an ideal-type protagonist is often presented as a producer of progress, innovation, and prosperity, it is not uncommon that these ambitions only reproduce existing socio-spatial patterns, without offering any true innovation or change. Instead of forming visions of different and better futures, the Developer narratives employ the language and structure of critical utopian works to create capitalist and neoliberal visions whose goal is never a critical reflection on the status quo, but rather an intensification, prolongation, and even perpetuation of the present, bringing with it a loss of possible other futures. Operating through the format of masterplans, marketing narratives, branding strategies, smart-city proposals, and other types of large-scale spatial developments, the Developer-produced narratives do not critically confront a given reality, ideology, or system of power, but rather aestheticize and intensify the existing ones, presenting a vision of the future which is in fact merely an optimization of the present, producing the conditions of its own possibility. Utopia becomes transformed into a totalizing ideology, prescribing set spatial orders, social hierarchies, and behavioral norms under the guise of innovation, optimization, efficiency, sustainability, or any other current developer-driven buzzword.

3.4.1. Examples of the Developer

A project which most illustratively occupies the position of the Developer within this analytical framework is The Line project by NEOM. Imagined as an ideal futuristic linear city for several million inhabitants located in the middle of the Saudi Arabian desert, the project is marketed as a "revolution in civilization" and "urban living" designed with "five minute neighborhoods", promoting features such as "temperate climate", "automated efficiency", "100% renewable energy", and described as "a city that delivers new wonders for the world" [30]. And while the language used is one of progress, innovation, betterment

and sustainability, even the initial steps in constructing it required extreme and destructive spatial interventions which had a significant negative environmental impact on the surrounding area.

Aside from the Line, which in its full scale remains purely theoretical, there is a long list of already built Developer “utopias” of scales varying from that of neighborhoods to entire cities. From the Dubai Palms and World Islands, Eco Atlantic in Lagos, Lusail in Qatar, Songdo in South Korea, we can locate numerous newly built cities or districts which have been marketed as utopian cities or neighbourhoods of the future. Despite being located in radically different contexts, these projects all share similar narratives, branding themselves as smart, green, ecological, and sustainable. However, the real narratives of how they came to be, as well as the often-negative socio-spatial impact that they had on the existing surroundings, are often left out.

The projects associated with the Developer protagonist, aside from the issues embedded in their ecological, social and ideological structures, differ radically from the other three identified ideal-type protagonists. Instead of producing any manner of critical reflections or alternatives to the existing and problematic socio-spatial systems of power, they deploy the language of utopia as a means of reproducing or even exacerbating existing issues and inequalities under the guise of progress, innovation, or optimization. Therefore, their defining characteristic does not emerge simply from their scale or ambition, but rather from their tendency to frame existing socio-spatial and economic conditions as narratives of desirable futures.

3.4.2. The Developer Graph

Set within the three-axis coordinate system [Figure 8], the Developer formally occupies a position similar to that of canonical utopian projects, in all but the critical/affirmative axis. Positioning itself strongly on the affirmative edge of the spectrum, the Developer uses this position as its predominant role through continuously enforcing the status quo, existing systems and structures of power, and dominant ideologies, all within the framework of capitalism as its overarching system. In the uncovering/projective axis, the Developer is positioned strongly on the projective side, generating as its output a totalizing and specific vision of a future which is based on the intensification of the present. In most cases, this ideal-type does not uncover any truly novel socio-spatial insights or offer any new potentials, except perhaps in the domain of technical innovation, which is often achieved due to overly ambitious ideas and large amounts of capital and power which often follow these projects. Lastly, on the possible/impossible axis, the Developer seemingly leans towards the impossible, constructing narratives of radically innovative and seemingly unattainable future conditions. The biggest appeal of these projects is derived precisely from their ability to present themselves as visions which exceed current technological, spatial, ecological, or social limits. But as opposed to many historical utopias, the impossibility they depict is rarely the result of fundamentally different socio-spatial conditions, as they are mostly firmly grounded within existing systems of power and technological development. Their distance from the present and the possible is therefore not measured ideologically, but primarily through the scale of their ambition and potential implementation—the impossible is purely technical or financial. Therefore, on the possible/impossible axis, the ideal-type of the Developer occupies a position which is closer to the impossible, but merely pragmatically, as its position remains fully anchored within the logic and possibilities of the present.

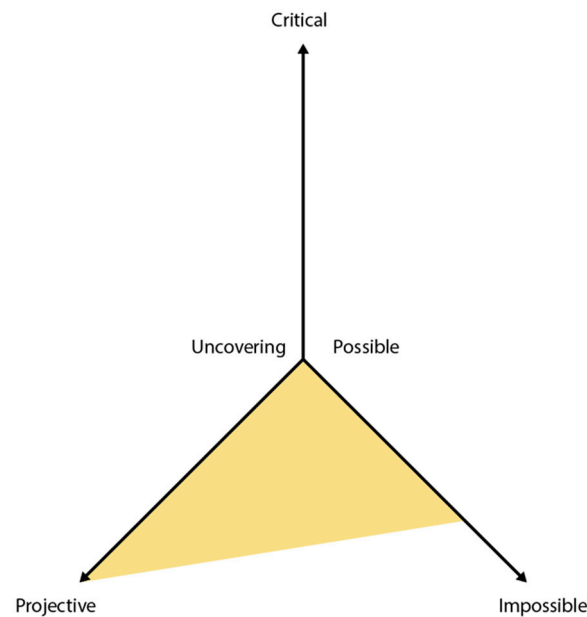


Figure 8. Positioning of the Developer, diagram by Jana Čulek.

4. Conclusions: Many Faces of Contemporary Utopia

Beginning from an observation that there is a perceived absence of contemporary architectural utopian production, this paper brought forward a hypothesis that the issue was perhaps not one of actual absence, but rather the lack of appropriate analytical tools and methods which would allow us to identify and observe contemporary forms of utopian production, after the break from grand narratives. As utopia became more fragmented and dispersed, the analytical tools required to engage with it needed to be able to encompass the multifaceted modes of its production.

To address this gap, the paper proposed a three-axis analytical framework which was structured around three interrelated conditions derived from traditional and canonical utopian works. Within the framework, each axis was represented recurring tensions within utopian scholarship, addressing a common dimension through which utopian production can be understood: (1) its relationship to an existing reality through the critical/affirmative axis, (2) its ambition for socio-spatial innovation through the possible/impossible axis, and (3) the scale and amount of changes it proposes while structuring an alternative future through the uncovering/projective axis.

The three-axis analytical framework was not intended as an overarching system of classification, but rather as a heuristic tool which can be used to situate the diverse and fragmented contemporary forms of utopian production, creating a shared analytical space. From this system, four Weberian ideal-type protagonists emerged, demonstrating that the production of utopia has not disappeared, but has become distributed across various modes of engagement and production.

Calibrating the proposed analytical system and the four emerging ideal-types against canonical examples of utopian works from the 20th century, it was possible to map and analyze their utopian tendencies and modes of operation. Observing the positioning of the ideal-type protagonists within the three defined axes, it was evident that each retreats from at least one of these axial edges. Comparing them with the canonical examples of utopian works which tend to gravitate towards the critical/impossible/projective ends of the three axes, which meant that they simultaneously (a) critically address, oppose and denounce their existing social and spatial orders, (b) offer detailed spatial and societal projections of alternative worlds, and (c) situate themselves at the very edges of the possible,

the ideal-type protagonists all demonstrated certain compromises in at least one of those three directions.

The Critical Thinker retained the criticality and the strive towards the impossible but is observed as restricted in proposing any novel and projective solutions or visions of a new world and society. The Speculative Designer remains closest to the traditional utopian model, stretching furthest towards the outer edges of the axes, but due to its more complex and correlated relationship to the present reality, and its more framed and segmented critical approach, it situates itself closer to the middle section of all three axes. The Architect, mostly retaining its position of criticality and projectively proposing actual tangible change, is constrained on the possible/impossible axis due to its imperative for realization. And lastly, the ideal-type Developer actively employs the visionary language of utopia, nominally striving towards the impossible, and proposing concrete visions of potential futures, but with a complete lack of critical reflection. In its stead, utopia is used to support and strengthen the dominant systems of power and ideologies, creating a mere intensification and multiplication of the present. What these four ideal-types demonstrate is that within a contemporary context, utopian production no longer occupies a single and identifiable territory, but rather appears in different forms of practice, and with different configurations of critique, projection, innovation, possibility, and affirmation.

The analysis therefore suggests that contemporary architecture is not characterized by the disappearance of utopian production, but rather by its redistribution across different but interrelated modes of practice. No longer appearing as totalizing narratives but employing different tools and methods of traditional utopias in distributed and interchangeable ways, utopia remains a relevant critical form within our increasingly fragmented and individualized condition, where the idea of imagining better collective futures seems increasingly impossible. While the early 20th century utopias were still distinguished through their simultaneously critical, projective, and almost impossible narratives, contemporary utopian production often emerges through a series of compromises, containing some rather than all the hallmarks of traditional utopian works. Whether this fragmentation and transformation was a necessary response to the end of grand narratives, or if it is a condition produced by the perceived limitations imposed by our contemporary socio-spatial conditions—a condition which both Jameson and Ford & Svensson describe as the irreversibility of capitalism itself and the permanent present—remains an open question. But what is clear is that the capacity to imagine better alternative futures has not completely vanished. Rather than synthesizing around a single dominant model or through creating a universal narrative, contemporary utopian practices can be identified through a variety of modes of engagement, each with its unique way of negotiating tensions between critique and affirmation, projection and uncovering, and possibility and impossibility.

The question we must ask is therefore not whether utopia as a form still exists within architecture, but what new forms it occupies today. By acknowledging its transformation from a totalizing socio-spatial vision of an alternative future to a critical method which could be deployed within diverse situations, processes, and practices, the three-axis analytical framework proposed in this paper, as well as the four ideal-type protagonists which have emerged from it as a result of recurring dialectical tensions and discussion within utopian scholarship, offer a possible way for identifying and interpreting these new dispersed utopian forms. Focusing its value not on creating a definitive classification system—which in today's transforming and fluid context is neither possible nor necessary—the proposed system offers a flexible analytical space through which architecture's continuing engagement with utopian forms can remain visible.

Funding: The research was funded as part of the DIGIT Seal of Excellence under the Synergies Program by the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Youth, and the World Bank; Grant number DIGIT 2.2.01.001.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ While the futures cone and its depiction is most recently attributed to the variation created by Joseph Voros (2003), it is most commonly attributed to Clem Bezold and Trevor Hancock (1994). (Theunissen, 2026).
- ² The evidence of which we also find directly in the title of his *Archaeologies of the Future: A Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005).
- ³ It is necessary to point out that while both Jameson's and Levitas' texts clearly favor the "archeological" or "utopia-as-process", Webb himself critically reviews some of the most established scholarly positions in both directions, arguing that the truth is, as always, somewhere in the middle.
- ⁴ Constellation is a relevant term used in this context as it signifies a lack of a hierarchical relationship between the utopian protagonists. The concept also comes from the scholarship of Manuels and Manuels who use it to describe the historical development of utopian thought in a non-linear and often non-correlational manner. (Manuel, Manuel, 1997).
- ⁵ Paper architecture as a concept is here used in way which encompasses a wider range of architectural practices than those of the concept's Soviet origins.
- ⁶ For more about the project see ZUS, *City of Permanent Temporality*, 2019.

References

1. Levitas, R. *The Concept of Utopia*; Peter Lang: Oxford, UK, 1990.
2. Levitas, R. *Utopia as Method—The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*; Palgrave Macmillan: London, UK, 2013.
3. Vieira, F. The Concept of Utopia. In *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*; Claeys, G., Ed.; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2010.
4. Manuel, F.E.; Manuel, F.P. *Utopian Thought in the Western World*; Belknap Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 1997.
5. Frye, N. Varieties of Literary Utopias. In *Daedalus*; The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 1965; Volume 94, No.2, Utopia.
6. Mumford, L. *The Story of Utopias*; Global Grey: New York, NY, USA, 2013; E-edition.
7. Mannheim, K. *Ideology and Utopia—An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge, 1936*; Martino Publishing: Mansfield Center, CT, USA, 2015.
8. Moylan, T. *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation*; Bloomsbury Academic: London, UK, 2020.
9. Davis, J.C. The History of Utopia: The Chronology of Nowhere. In *Utopias*; Alexander, G., Ed.; Duckworth: London, UK, 1984.
10. Eaton, R. *Ideal Cities: Utopianism and the (Un)Built Environment*; Thames & Hudson: London, UK, 2002.
11. Čulek, J. Utopia as Critical Method: A Comparative Analysis of Six Architectural and Literary Utopias. Ph.D. Dissertation, Delft University of Technology, Delft, The Netherlands, 2023.
12. Claeys, G. *Utopia: The History of an Idea*; Thames Hudson: London, UK, 2020.
13. Marin, L. *Utopics: Spatial Play*; The Macmillan Press Ltd.: London, UK, 1984.
14. Webb, D. Critical Pedagogy, Utopia and Political (Dis)engagement. *Power Educ.* **2013**, *5*, 280–290. [CrossRef]
15. Howard, E. *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform (1898)*; Routledge: Oxford, UK, 2003.
16. Hilberseimer, L. *Metropolisarchitecture (1927)*. In *Metropolisarchitecture and Selected Essays*; Anderson, R., Ed.; GSAPP Books: New York, NY, USA, 2012; pp. 84–281.
17. Superstudio. Twelve Cautionary Tales for Christmas. *Archit. Des.* **1971**, *12*, 737–742. Available online: <https://socks-studio.com/2011/09/17/twelve-cautionary-tales-for-christmas-12-ideal-cities-by-superstudio-1971/> (accessed on 6 September 2018).
18. Weber, M. *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences*; Shils, E.A., Finch, H.A., Eds. and Translators; Free Press: Glencoe, IL, USA, 1949.
19. Jameson, F. *Archaeologies of the Future—The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*; Verso: London, UK, 2005.
20. Frase, P. *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism*; Verso Books: London, UK; New York, NY, USA, 2016.
21. Ait-Touati, F.; Arènes, A.; Grégoire, A. *Terra Forma: A Book of Speculative Maps*; MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2022.

22. Dunne, A.; Raby, F. *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*; The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2013.
23. Design Earth. *The Planet After Geoengineering*; Actar Publishers: Arles, France, 2022.
24. Aureli, P.V.; Tattara, M. *Dogma: 11 Projects*; Architectural Association Publications: London, UK, 2013.
25. Barton, G. *Worldbuilding Pedagogies: Competencies and Culture of Speculation*; Lecture; Royal College of Art: London, UK, 2019.
26. Coleman, N. *Utopias and Architecture*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2005.
27. Coleman, N. The Problematic of Architecture and Utopia. *Utop. Stud.* **2014**, *25*, 1–22. [CrossRef]
28. ZUS (Zones Urbaines Sensibles). *City of Permanent Temporality: Incomplete & Unfinished*; van Boxel, E., Koreman, K., Eds.; nai010 Publishers: Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2019.
29. Ford, D.R.; Svensson, M. Still-existing utopian pedagogy: Architecture, curriculum, and the revolutionary imaginary. *Rev. Educ. Pedagog. Cult. Stud.* **2024**, *46*, 561–577. [CrossRef]
30. NEOM. What Is NEOM? YouTube Video, 2:18. Posted by NEOM. 26 July 2022. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kz5vEqdaSc> (accessed on 18 November 2025).

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.