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Butt, Amy

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‘Only one way in and one way out’: Staging Utopian Spaces

Amy Butt

Department of Architecture, University of Reading
Reading, UK

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Abstract

This polyphonic paper draws together methods, content and impressions from a workshop on utopian spatial practice. It provides a critical reflection on the utopian possibilities inherent in small scale performances of spatial re-organization which re-structure existing patterns of behaviour. Over the course of this workshop, held as part of the ‘Utopian Acts’ conference, the mundane space of a university seminar room was briefly transformed. Participants were asked to read extracts from three works of feminist utopian science fiction (sf): Ursula Le Guin’s ‘The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia’, Marge Piercy’s ‘Woman on the Edge of Time’ and Sally Miller Gearhart’s ‘The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women’. They then worked in groups to rearrange the furniture into an echo of the utopian space of the text. By inhabiting these temporary stagings of utopian space the participants disrupted existing patterns of behaviour and opened up a site for alternatives. This process of imaginative construction is extended into this paper which crosses the fields of architecture, utopian studies, drawing and performance. A series of narrative architectural drawings by the author are presented alongside commentary from the workshop participants to reflect on multiple voices and modes of interpretation which shaped these overlapping utopian acts of construction. This act of remaking space is considered in terms of space as social practice to ask how the re-staging of a single room can open up alternative possibilities for wider socio-spatial action. It draws on Dolan’s conception of utopian performatives to ask whether the non-hierarchical engagement of participants in an act of construction offers a utopian mode of practice. From this, it asks whether the re-staging of spaces drawn from utopian sf can be considered an ‘act of imagination’ as called for in Ruth Levitas’ ‘Utopia as Method’. Through drawings, descriptions, critical theory and transcribed conversation this paper reflects on an attempt to establish a fragment of utopian space, establishing an alternative way of being, however small and fleeting.

Keywords: Utopia; Architecture; Science Fiction; Feminism

The Conference

Panel: Building Utopia: 13:45 - 15:15, GOR G01

Come and re-stage the imagined worlds of feminist utopian novels, in a workshop that asks you to build and occupy the spaces of science fiction. Through the collective process of make-shift construction, we will create a common ground to discuss how architecture can reflect, shape, or support utopian social practice.¹

An Introduction

I am here as an architect and architectural lecturer. For me, space is a social practice, by that I mean that the way we make a space reflects and reinforces the power relations within it. Making a space solidifies the behaviours that are possible within it, which in turn reinforces the society that established it. So, what if we want to behave differently or relate differently? To do so, we need to consider how to create sites of possibility and that requires a utopian act.²

Architecture has a conflicted relationship with utopia.³ Too often associated with the totalising blueprint visions of the singular individual, it is a term which seems to sit uncomfortably with the current understanding of architecture as a social practice, its meanings constructed through the subjective lens of personal experience and situated, everyday patterns of inhabitation.⁴ But architecture remains a utopian practice, driven by a desire to improve, enrich or enable better ways of being in the world. If, as Lefebvre believes, ‘to change life, [. . .] we must first change space’, it is both the obligation and the delight of architecture to open space for alternative ways of being in the world.⁵

This workshop was an attempt to confront some of the limitations on the transformational nature of spatial practice. As an architect I am all too aware that both my architectural practice and teaching are enacted within existing frameworks of capitalist neoliberalism, and I am forced to ask whether it is possible to design spaces whose processes of construction and inhabitation resist the reproduction of existing power relations. While architecture does not direct or determine our actions, it exerts an affective influence over these subjective and situated practices, prompting patterns of behaviour or eliciting emotional responses.⁶ How then can we open up spaces of possibility, a utopian enclave, within a built environment which structuralises the status quo? This workshop formed part of my continuing attempt to confront this challenge and construct an architecture of utopian intent.

¹ Katie Stone and Raphael Kabo, eds. ‘Utopian Acts 2018’, September 2018.

<http://utopia.ac/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Utopian-Acts-2018-programme.pdf>.

² This text was read aloud at the beginning of the Utopian Acts workshop. Amy Butt, ‘Building Utopia: Feminist Utopian Architecture Workshop’ (Birkbeck: University of London, 2018).

³ For further discussion on utopian thought in architectural education and practice see: Nathaniel Coleman, ‘Recovering Utopia’, *Journal of Architectural Education* 67, no. 1 (2013): 24-26; and Nathaniel Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005).

⁴ For work on the subjective, emotional experience of architecture in relation to design intent see for example: Loretta Lees and Richard Baxter, ‘A “Building Event” of Fear: Thinking through the Geography of Architecture’, *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, no. 2 (1 March 2011): 107-22; and Gillian Rose, Monica Degen and Begum Basdas. ‘More on “Big Things”’: Building Events and Feelings’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35, no. 3 (15 April 2010): 334-49.

⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, Blackwell, 2011).

⁶ See for example: Nigel Thrift, ‘Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect’, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 86, no. 1 (1 March 2004): 57-78.; Carmelo Gambacorta, ‘Experiences of Daily Life’, *Current Sociology* 37, no. 1 (1 March 1989): 121-40; and Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, ‘Affect – An Ethnocentric Encounter? Exploring the “Universalist” Imperative of Emotional/Affectual Geographies’, *Area* 38, no. 2 (16 June 2006): 213-17.

This begs the question, how might utopian space be configured? What examples do we have to refer to? We can look to utopian fiction. Over the next forty-five minutes we will be enacting three different ways of being in this room, inspired by extracts from three works of utopian fiction. You don't need to know these writers or these texts; the only thing I will say about them is that they are considered to be critical utopias. That is, they do not propose an ideal society, instead they offer something which is an alternative to what we have. The societies they depict are critical of our contemporary life, they have reflected on it and evolved it, but they are not finished. In that these novels offer us a possible point of perspective, they consider utopia not as a destination but as a movement towards an ever-receding horizon.⁷

In selecting the texts for this workshop, I turned to utopian feminist works which both envisage alternative models of society and, to a lesser extent, provide descriptions of the architecture through which this society is enacted; the anarcho-communist moon of Anares, in *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, the communities of *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* which are founded on a mystical connection to their environment, and the agrarian, decentralised communities of Mattapoisett in *Woman on the Edge of Time*. All of these texts include descriptions of space constructed on the basis of radically different social and economic systems. They are not propositions of ideal societies or imaginary enactments of a utopian end time, rather they present persistently flawed and shifting societies which acknowledge and attempt to redress their own perceived shortcomings. In this, they can be considered as critical utopias,⁸ offering explicit critique on contemporary social structures through the depiction of alternatives.⁹

This workshop aimed to extend the critical potential of these texts by constructing a site to contemplate spatial alternatives. It extracted a short piece of spatial description from these novels and asked the participants to relate to the utopian possibility as expressed in the architectural space of the text, rather than its expression in the narrative. Through their architectural descriptions, these novels offer an opportunity for critical reflection on our contemporary spatial practices. By examining how alternative social structures are made manifest we are better able to question how our own social systems and power structures are made tangible through the built environment.¹⁰

In order to broaden participation and establish relative parity between participants, familiarity with these texts was not a pre-requisite of this workshop. This was particularly critical as this workshop was offered as part of a free day of events at Birkbeck College, University of London, with participants of diverse ages and backgrounds, including undergraduate and postgraduate students, professionals, activists and artists as well as senior academics. So, rather than addressing the novel as a whole, it relied on extracts to reduce the world of the text down to an individual encounter with an architectural space which could then act as a common ground between the eighteen participants. While this flattened the spatial and social complexity of these novels where radical collectivism is reflected in architectures that delight in multiplicity, it made their subsequent transformation possible through collective process of making.

⁷ Butt, 'Building Utopia'.

⁸ For definitions and discussion of critical utopias, see: Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, (Milton Park: Taylor & Francis, 1986).

⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005).

¹⁰ Amy Butt, "'Endless Forms, Vistas and Hues': Why Architects Should Read Science Fiction", *Arq: Architectural Research Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (June 2018): 151-60.

These books provide a critical point of reflection on the whole of society, but I would like to focus on one small aspect: spatial organization. How does spatial arrangement make some actions, conversations or interactions possible and close off others? This is a question which has broad reaching repercussions across the scale of a city, but also affects how we might arrange ourselves within the confines of a single room. I would like to ask if we can establish a fragment of utopian space in this room, or simply explore how different this room could be? Something fleeting, which needs to be reset for the next session, but something which however briefly tests out an alternative.¹¹

Rather than looking at the scale of the city, or the novel, this workshop looked to operate on the smaller scale of the group, or the room. This required acts of destructive distillation and created opportunities for oversimplification, but it also established a scale and scope to the workshops which could be readily understood and responded to.

Through group discussion these fictional spaces were moved from the immaterial space of the text to physical re-enactment, from individual interpretation to collective realisation. The participants were asked to read and re-stage the spaces described in the text as a group. This process, of negotiated and situated translation, also allowed individual participants to project and thus encounter their own spatial interpretation and imagination of utopia. In turn it offered a reflection on the act of construction, asking whether any fragments of the utopian intent of these novels were able to withstand this spatial taxidermy. While the restaging of a single space as a reflection of a whole society risked the reduction of complex socio-spatial relations into a diagrammatic form, this act of construction allowed for situated and subjective reflections on the emotional and social impact of spatial organisation in a manner which corresponded to many of the community practices these novels depict. It provided a spatial lens through which notions of control, subjectivity and awareness were made manifest in tangible forms which could then be collectively addressed.

I would argue that by confronting the impossibility of this act of translation and the limitations of any act of spatial closure, this workshop opened up space to discuss the value of contingent utopias and the productive value of failure. As debated by Levitas and Sargisson, the utopian potential of intentional communities whose built structures are drawn from and by their alternative social models, could be considered to be limited by their transitory nature, dwindling and dissipating rather than eliciting widespread change.¹² However, the conception of utopia as something which might be fleeting or flawed makes it no less valuable, rather it provides a model of utopia as method enriched with the recognition of necessary failure, resolutely provisional.¹³ The temporary nature of these spaces and the acknowledged limitations of scale in terms of the size of the room, the duration of the workshop, and the scope of the text, removed the potential burden that the constructions should stand as propositions, and allows them to be understood as acts of possibility.

I will ask you to split into three groups, each with one quote from a novel. You will have five minutes to read this quote aloud to one another and plan out how you will abstract, enact, stage, perform, create or reflect on the space or structure it describes using the materials in this room; so rearranging or stacking the chairs, hanging or draping fabric, running masking tape on the floor. Then, going around each group in turn, you will have five minutes to direct the rest of us to help you rearrange the room.¹⁴

¹¹ Butt, 'Building Utopia'.

¹² Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, 'Utopia in Dark Times', in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (New York: Routledge, 2003), 13-28.

¹³ Ruth Levitas, 'Looking for the Blue: The Necessity of Utopia', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 12, no. 3 (1 October 2007): 289-306.

¹⁴ Butt, 'Building Utopia'.

The materials for construction within this workshop were also deliberately limited. They comprised; some lengths of cloth, rope, tape and the tables and chairs which were already in the room. It was intended that the familiar mundanity of these objects would remove any barriers to participation which might have been associated with more specialist construction materials. Rather than relying on a common knowledge of the text, the participants were able to communicate through a common language of materials, objects and spatial form.

As a result, the installations were evidently the result of a haphazard throwing together of people and the redeployment of materials meant for another purpose, and as such they projected a sense of impermanence and fragility in each configuration. This quality of ‘throwntogetherness’ is described by Massey in relation to urban environment where it can be found in the unlikely juxtapositions of buildings or the uncoordinated being together of neighbours.¹⁵ As Massey describes, it is a vital part of the ‘productiveness of spatiality’ which opens up spaces of possibility through encounters with diversity and difference.

The use of predominantly found and repurposed materials also served to maintain an ambiguity of spatial interpretation. It was not possible to literally reconstruct the spaces of the text, so instead we had to construct something which would mirror its affective or symbolic impact. While this heightened the risk of essentialising or instrumentalising the spaces of the text, it demanded a level of critical engagement in the act of re-making. As well as reading the text and undertaking the imaginary reconstitution of society within these pages, the participants needed to externalise their subjective reading of this space and to construct it so that it could be understood and inhabited by others. In doing so, we were involved in a continual process of spatial self-critique, questioning how to interpret and express our individual conceptions of a described place.

So, when you read your extract consider what qualities you will abstract from it and how you would enact them within this room, how you would use these materials to shape us: would we be divided, huddled, in a line, dispersed, holding something up, sat around something, under, above or between, supported, gathered or isolated, sitting, crouching, or lying down. We will then all gather in the reconfigured space for a five-minute discussion, which the group who led the construction will lead, each person asking one of the questions on the cards I have given out.¹⁶

My desire to hold this workshop was driven in no small part by my desire to explore how these texts might be interpreted by others, to experience an unexpected encounter with multiple subjective expressions and interpretations of described space. As such, it was necessary that I absent myself as far as possible from the design process. To do so, the participants were split into three groups, each of which was given one of the three quotes. These smaller groups were then responsible for directing all of us in the construction of an installation in response to their collective interpretation of the text.

I am very aware that this attempt at a non-hierarchical, collaborative process had several significant limitations, not least the predetermined selection of quotes, questions and materials. In response I attempted to undertake a performative division of self; to step out of my role as session organiser and take on the role of a participant during the construction process. However, my framing of the session as an architectural exploration and my delivery of an introductory explanation placed me in a position of implicit authority, and I did not establish any mechanisms for this to be redressed during the session. Despite these significant limitations, control over the design and construction of the installations was directed by the participant groups and the interventions they devised were the result of collective

¹⁵ Doreen B. Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005).

¹⁶ Butt, ‘Building Utopia’.

interpretation rather than the didactic reproduction of a singular opinion. This has been reflected in the writing of this paper, which gratefully incorporates responses from Alexandra Lea, Sheryl Medlicott, Sasha Myerson, Amber Plumbly, Amy Stebbings, Dan Stebbings and Tim Welch.

It was also my hope that, regardless of the source texts or the experience of the spaces created, this act of collective construction and inhabitation might be considered a utopian act in and of itself centred around a shared endeavour which prompts a sense of communal belonging. In this desire—that a non-hierarchical process might provide space for collective performance—this act of construction holds some commonality to the act of devising within theatre.¹⁷ As understood by Dolan, theatre provides a space in which an image of a better future can be articulated and even embodied, however briefly.¹⁸ This happens both in the co-production of a work, but also in the profound nature of shared experience which encompasses the audience. In this workshop, the co-production of the installations and the shared experience of inhabitation provided some echoes of the profound experiences of theatre which Dolan believes can shake our consciousness of ourselves in the world.¹⁹

The architectural space and material conditions of the theatre are an integral part of this sense of utopian possibility for collective performance.²⁰ But, rather than choosing to hold this workshop in a space designed for such transformative moments it was held in a seminar room, to enact this utopian possibility within a mundane space.²¹ It was hoped that this might provide an unsettling moment of heightened spatial awareness,²² where the familiar established behaviours within a seminar room were challenged. In creating and enacting this small disturbance to the predetermined of patterns of everyday life, we undertook an act of imagination which engages with the institutional and social structures of the present, to open up a site for spatial and social alternatives.²³

Then we will disassemble it all and construct the next fragmentary utopia.²⁴

¹⁷ Virginie Magnat, 'Devising Utopia, or Asking for the Moon', *Theatre Topics* 15, no. 1 (2005): 73-86.

¹⁸ Jill Dolan, 'Performance, Utopia, and the "Utopian Performative"', *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 3 (2001): 457.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 456.

²⁰ David Savran, 'Choices Made and Unmade', *Theater* 31, no. 2 (2001): 89-95.

²¹ Gambacorta, 'Experiences of Daily Life', 121.

²² For discussions on the utopian potential of the unsettled architectural encounter, see, for example:

David Pinder, *Visions of the City: Utopianism, Power and Politics in Twentieth-Century Urbanism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005);

Peter Kraftl, 'Architectural Movements, Utopian Moments: (In)Coherent Renderings of the Hundertwasserhaus, Vienna', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 92, no. 4 (1 December 2010): 327-45.

²³ Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²⁴ Butt, 'Building Utopia'.

The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia

There was a wall. It did not look important. It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared; an adult could look right over it, and even a child could climb it. ... it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, an idea of boundary. But the idea was real. It was important. Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on.²⁵

One person clutches this quote in their hand. They step forward, nervously catching the eyes of the those who had been discussing this text with them, silently asking permission to speak on their behalf. They turn to address the rest of us, those who were not part of that intimate group. They ask us to build a wall.

I notice heavy glances at the tables and chairs; it is not furniture designed to be moved. But, the sound of metal legs dragging across the carpet and softly spoken negotiations of space and strength soon breaks the silence which could have built between strangers. With the weight of a table balanced between several pairs of hands, I quietly exert myself, upturning and balancing in accordance to the lines being gestured towards by outstretched arms.

Our structure gains substance. It carves a gently diminishing arc from the center of one wall to the open window on the wall next to it. A cloth is flung across the whole to obscure the gaps and lend it an air of solidity. One corner of the room is now partitioned off, identified and made special.

At its highest point, where the makeshift barrier meets the wall of the room, chairs are delicately balanced on top of one another on the table top. When the door opens to admit late arrivals the timber panel forms another plane of the wall, drawing the visitor in along its gentle curve. When the door is closed, two people stand on either side of the barrier holding fingertips in an arch, marking the point of furthest reach. From here the wall decreases in height; tables are stood upright, chairs stacked, laid on their sides, and finally one person is lying on the floor, a rope coiled around their waist which follows the line of an outstretched arm to the window. Their legs are wrapped around the base of the chair, blurring the line between a barrier which is constructed and one which is performed. The line of the rope is trailed carefully out of the open window and out of sight, and the line of the wall divides London in our collective imagination.

Those inside the wall begin to sit down, shuffling away from the barrier to rest their backs against the wall of the room. Those outside remain standing, edging closer to the barrier and holding onto the tables or their own arms in gestures of reassurance or support. None of us move from one side of the barrier to the other throughout the discussion.

²⁵ Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).



Image 1: The Dispossessed

The following responses were written by Amy Butt, Alexandra Lea, Sheryl Medlicott, Sasha Myerson, Amber Plumbly, Amy Stebbings, Dan Stebbings and Tim Welch.

What have we done?

Something regrettable.
We created a wall.
We created a wall using the furniture and it divided the group.
A wall that was not a wall.
A boundary that was primarily symbolic or ‘immaterial’ in nature.
Split the room in two with a permeable wall.
We are split into unequal parts, creating imbalance.
Divided the space but with continuously decreasing distinction.
It has the feeling of a ruin.
The wall was made out of random objects and people to create an ambiguous installation.
A tapering/sloping wall starting at chest height (so easily traversable by the able-bodied at least!) and then gradually descending/sloping downward until disappearing into the ground at which point it became a ‘symbolic’ line signified by only a line of ribbon (in our case) that extended (apparently) infinitely out of the window and off into London (who knows when it might stop, perhaps the line is infinite . . .)
We used the objects to recreate the wall. Our focus was the feeling of the wall on the people. That people still respected its presence even when it no longer really existed. The person laying down mimics the wall having control.
[a voice from the floor] I am the one thinking of the wall. The idea is real, and it is my idea.

How does it make you feel?

Divided, besieged.
Separate, divided.
Divided. Excluded. Outside.
I feel exposed. I am free to move but I feel left out.
It made me feel excluded, as I didn't have a role to play.
I feel enclosed. Safe. Observed and contained.
That we created a divide but somehow left it open for everyone, so it was a safe space.
It depends on where I am.
(holding arms over the wall) It is possible to connect across the wall, but it is tiring.

Who has control?

I thought those on the outside would have control, but they look lost.
I thought those inside would, but they look cornered.
Ambiguous, neither the inside or outside positions are stable.
The wall? Or the person who can change the wall.
The wall had control as it determined which side you were on.
The wall. It segregated the room—who is inside, who is not.
The wall.
Not me.
No one.

What can we do in this space?

We can construct groups. On one side of the wall we are forced together.
We can communicate, we can look at one another and we can share our ideas.
You can see and talk across it.
Bridge the divide, rebel by crossing it.
We can discuss spatial exclusion.
We can talk about power. Who feels included and who feels outside.
We can talk about the process of making.
. . . the poetic potentiality of the architectural form we generated collectively—and seemingly instinctually.

Woman on the Edge of Time

Wandering through the rooms, she found some low-ceilinged, some opening into fisheye windows, into green houses and porches. Some rooms crept into nooks and crannies, small staircases. Others led them to courts full of plants . . . carp lazed in a small stream that flowed through a room whirring with machines. Room where the walls were mosaics of old bottles. Room of stark white blocks with rude mats on the floor. Room where a thin film of gauze was all that separated inside and outside.²⁶

We grasp the legs of tables and chairs and reluctantly return them to the centre of the room. As the wall is dismantled the furniture seems to swell to fill the space and we are pushed back to the edges.

The next group reassembles itself, and those who had discussed this quote begin to speak in turn. They describe a warren of connected spaces, squatting low to contemplate the forest of table legs and the path which could be carved through them. There is no clear pattern drawn out, but by unspoken agreement the tables are shifted into a single curving line which winds around us all in a loose loop. There is a tunnel under the table tops, but it is cracked and broken along its length where we have forced the stubbornly rectangular forms of the tables into a sweeping curve. A cloth is draped over the voids between edges and corners to soften and complete the line of enclosure.

Our collective act completed, we each turn to contemplate the area in which we find ourselves. Sitting cross legged on the floor, one person uses masking tape to draw a line equal to the reach of their arms swung around them. Another straight line forced to curve; the tape is folded, torn and rucked up against the surface of the carpet, easily coming unstuck. Observing them I draw a line around myself, and the branching loop of the tables blossoms with haphazard protrusions. In some, clips are cast onto the floor to echo the silver quick flash of fish, while others sit flexing fingertips or arms in the sway of leaves. Beneath the tables, those who have not marked out their own pockets of space crawl between them, demonstrating their continued connection through movement. A complex and unplanned series of individual moments.

²⁶ Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (New York, Fawcett Crest, 1983).

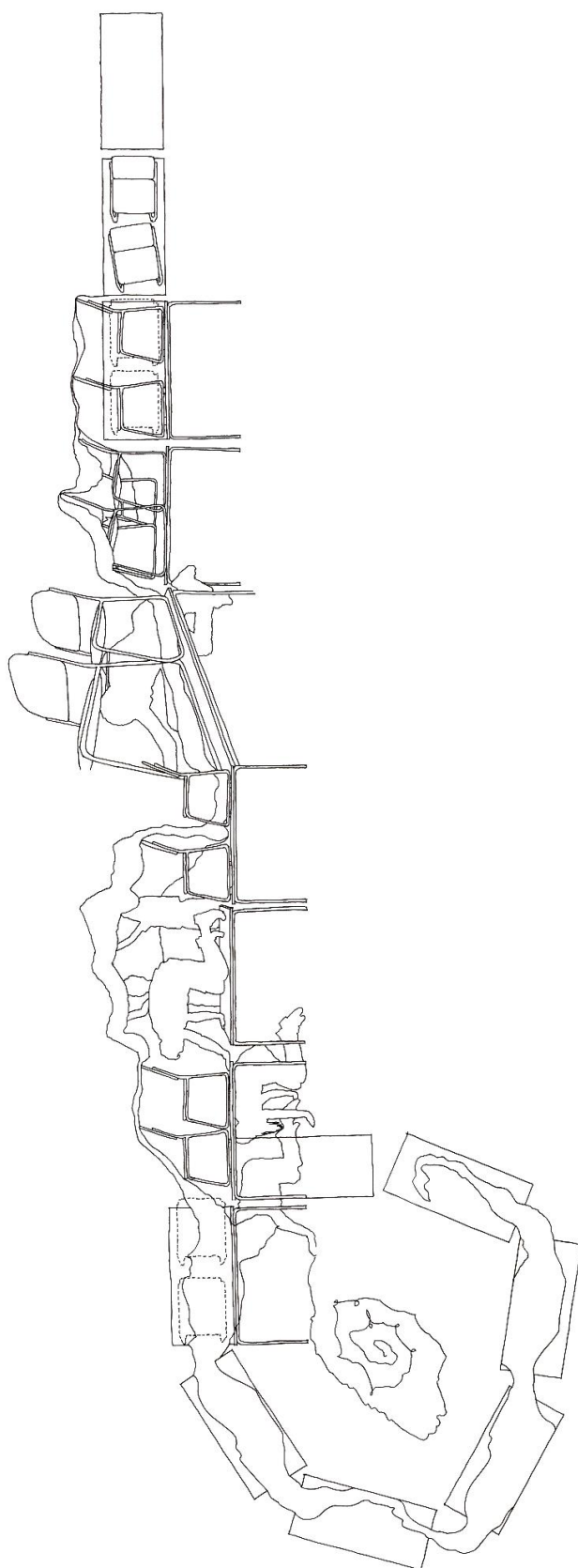


Image 2: Woman on the Edge of Time

The following responses were written by Amy Butt, Alexandra Lea, Sheryl Medlicott, Sasha Myerson, Amber Plumbly, Amy Stebbings, Dan Stebbings and Tim Welch.

What have we done?

The literal description reminds me of an endless pleasure palace full of delights and an infinite possibility of atmospheres and encounters.

We created a maze.

I only understand the bits I have made.

Created a warren like series of tunnels and rooms, separated by cloth.

. . . a more chaotic and labyrinthine form.

Created a more eclectic and varied space.

Lots of niches to fit/hide in.

I have created my own space. It is connected but contained.

Created a room with various objects.

How does it make you feel?

Breezy, private yet transparent, homely.

Fun, open, creative.

More willing to explore.

Confused.

. . . melancholy, mysterious and unknowable . . .

Who has control?

Those inside, those who have knowledge of the space.

[a comparison to the London of *Gloriana: Or, The Unfullfill'd Queen* by Michael Moorcock]

. . . London is speculated to have become an endless extension of the Queens [sic] palace with public spaces consumed into vast interiors and parts of the city lost and forgotten and sealed off behind secret doors. The palace is impossibly vast and any semblance of the original plan or layout is lost to time.

Control was much more absent.

I have control of this pocket of space. But it is open on one side to others.

As a group we weren't all creating one shape, everyone had a different task, so it was unclear what each other was trying to represent.

The people in the connecting space. They are links between our individual moments.

No one, but people can seem like outsiders looking in.

What can we do in this space?

You could explore the space, as there were lots of different areas which were intriguing.

Peacefully watch the fish.

It feels like it might have a variety of purposes, a place to hide or disappear.

We can change, adapt, move around.

We can talk about diversity, disparate people with individual desires.

The installation allowed us to be whatever we wanted to be.

The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women

Below her she could see the wide path again as it wound around the circle and down, growing narrower, around and down again and again, each time in successively smaller orbits

Only one way from this point on. Only one way in and one way out . . .

She could not be sure that the blackness of those upper regions was a ceiling of any sort; rather the funnel seemed to move up and outward in a spread of forever shadow. She looked again at the spiraling path below her; it wound methodically into a circular area, to an ending, at last, of the downward part.²⁷

The final group gathers, and after quick whispered words they offer us the clear description of a spiral, a tightening of the loose loop of tables into a single circle. With only momentary hesitation we clear space in the very centre of the room. Our movements together have gained some semblance of coordinated grace, as we heft the now familiar weights and call out for assistance with casual ease.

A single row of tables curves back on itself in a clumsy hexagon, all other furniture pushed back against the walls. Chairs are placed on top of the tables, arranged so that each faces the back of the chair in front. They suggest movement, the direction implied by the gaze of one person who climbs onto the tables to take a seat in one of the chairs. A cloth is threaded through the legs of the chairs and a rope tied between them, connecting and softening the singular objects into a cohesive whole. In the centre, the trailing end of the rope is carefully laid out into a spiral.

But it requires movement. The arrangement of tables and chairs alone cannot convey the looping repetition of the text. Two people hold up the edges of the cloth, create an opening through which others can duck and crouch. The rustle of fabric is soon joined by the rasp of knees catching on the carpet tile as people crawl slowly under the tables, marking out the edges of this circle. Above this, others slide themselves into the gap between table top and chair legs, poised to crawl in a mirror of the movement below. One person slides into this gap on their belly, but their legs and arms become entangled in the furniture. They laughingly admit to their predicament and now familiar hands grasp their ankles to drag them out. I sit in the centre while around me others shuffle around the spiral, knocking into metal legs and into one another, the clumsy occupation of a space which is just too small. They settle wherever the movement has led them, smiling at this shared performance while still hunched in these confining spaces.

²⁷ Sally Miller Gearhart, *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1985)



Image 3: The Wanderground

The following responses were written by Amy Butt, Alexandra Lea, Sheryl Medlicott, Sasha Myerson, Amber Plumbly, Amy Stebbings, Dan Stebbings and Tim Welch.

What have we done?

We made a spiral.
Created a spiral. It draws you in. It draws you down.
. . . the spiralling form . . . the vortex or the ‘whirlwind’ . . .
Made a downward spiral of bodies and rope.
Created circle pathways, lower and higher.
Created a spiral labyrinth.
We thought about the spiraling of the wall, but that it didn’t really ever get anywhere. It was important to have movement in the installation.

How does it make you feel?

There was no obvious way to move through it ‘successfully’, and instead people felt lost, but continued onwards despite not knowing how to move through or why they were doing so.
I expected to feel safe, surrounded and protected. Womb-like. I expected it to be peaceful.
It made me feel trapped as crawling through the tables felt very tight.
Claustrophobic.
Confused and potentially surrounded.
Feeling a shape rather than conceiving it.
Creates a strange sense of motion.
Part of a chain of awkward passings.
. . . there was also something ‘doomed’ about it . . .

Who has control?

The spiral itself.
The spiral.
It feels inevitable.
Those who made the circles as you had to follow their path.
I have to keep pace with those in front and behind me.
It felt like we were losing control as we moved through.
We all had control and were reliant on each other, although I wanted to stop crawling, I couldn’t as the person behind me needed me to keep moving.
We wanted people to feel the sensation of being enclosed and being trapped, but that they had to continue.
You could choose where you wanted to go in this installation but it felt that once you were a part of it you followed the set path.
I cannot control my own movements. I can only move in one direction.

What can we do in this space?

[discussing gendered spaces] It was almost like a reverse version of the often depicted Tower of Babel and appropriately opposite to the ‘erect’ form that is often depicted in representation of this ‘mythical’ building . . . often the projecting skyward forms of skyscrapers have masculine connotations, whilst the ‘basin’ forms of caves, caverns, lakes and ponds (the Lady of the Lake) have a much more ‘feminine’ quality—whether or not these forms have been co-opted by religions and layered with connotative values connecting one with positivity (god) and the other with negativity (the devil) is interesting to consider.
Become lost, a space of worship, a space of trial, loose sense of self and orientation.
We can discuss feelings of inevitability, powerlessness.
We could break out of it but most of us followed the route that was created. It engaged people to move around.
Some members of the group made the shape with the furniture while others moved in the shape with their bodies.
Try to continue, to get past one another.
Keep going.

On Reflection

The aim of this was to regain our spatial autonomy. By learning through practices of play, we were encouraged to be like children again who do not assume rules about what space can be.²⁸

We had only a few moments to reflect at the end of the workshop before the last installation needed to be deconstructed and the room reinstated to its original form. Our final conversation gradually broadened in scope: from what these particular installations had made us feel, to what the construction of these spaces together had meant, or could mean, for us. A critical shift from the consideration of a single utopian proposition, to the notion of utopia as process.²⁹

For some, the movement between one installation and the next had been all too swift, cutting short some of our earlier discussions. But this had also established a momentum which permeated the construction process and meant there was little time for reticence. As such, the installations drew heavily on instinctual reactions exposing some of our own spatial assumptions and associations. This interweaving of lived experience and imagined space meant that our discussions were able to value personal memory and emotional responses, and both installations and texts were implicitly understood as being contingent and socially constructed.

Throughout the session, we were continually aware of the limitations on what we could construct, struggling against the reductive nature of spatial translation and the palpable absence of the world of the novel. We were actively engaged in testing what could be enacted within this constrained and controlled environment of the seminar room. While limited, the approachable scale of the room and text offered us a collective opportunity to remake some small fragment of the world in a way other to that which had been intended. Not as a proposition but as a movement towards a utopian horizon, insofar as we opened up the space of possibility.

. . . they open up the discussion and allow anybody to respond without fear of judgment or fear of being wrong ...it allows you to have an emotional response and leaves room for people to interpret the installations however they wish.... gave us all room to interpret and create in a safe space, and then reflect on that as a group and find meaning.³⁰

This is the utopian act which I will endeavour to sustain in my architectural practice and teaching. For a brief moment, in this room, we were able to test out possible worlds by constructing and inhabiting them. As tangible objects, they were able to be shared and discussed. Their material presence granted them some semblance of affective or emotional impact, and subsequently opened up space for discussion which valued these notions as a critical part of design. They were collectively constructed and given meaning through subjective interpretations, in a way which reflects the conception of space as a social practice.

This workshop seemed to offer a moment of slippage—between the fictional space of utopian science-fiction and the banal spaces of the everyday, and between the act of imagination and the act of inhabitation. For those of us seeking to enact utopian possibilities

²⁸ Sasha Myerson, 'Conference Report: Utopian Acts 2018', *Vector*, 11 October 2018, <https://vector-bsfa.com/2018/10/11/conference-report-utopian-acts-2018/>.

²⁹ As described by Bammer, it responded to a shared desire 'to replace the idea of "a utopia" as something fixed, a form to be fleshed out, with the idea of 'the utopian' as an approach toward'. Angelika Bammer, *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 7.

³⁰ Amber Plumbly, interview.

within the constraints of our contemporary existence, these fleeting moments of collective action open up the small possibility of hope.

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