Into the Concept of Utopia Versus Dystopia: A Comparative Analysis Between Two Cities

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Abstract

In the realm of construction, many contemporary cities adopt ambitious projects of different types. Yet, in some cities, such as Baghdad, this phenomenon is obvious despite the actual chaotic architecture and urban formation of the city, while in other cities, such as Dubai, the same phenomenon seems to be part of a sophisticated, well-planned city. The question is: What are the criteria for such a contradictory/ harmonious manifestation in a city?

Based on the assumption that the apparent status of such contemporary cities is a manifestation of the concept of Utopia versus Dystopia, this research aims to reach a method for detecting the manifestation of the duality of Utopia- Dystopia in contemporary cities. The paper suggests that while one side of this duality prevails within one realm, such as the realm of construction, the opposite party is embedded in other realms within the same city.

The proposal sought the visual criteria of Utopia versus Dystopia in the realm of architecture and urban formation to build a method for comparative analysis, then run the comparison between two cities: Baghdad and Dubai. The method led to considering visual indicators that enabled the research to pursue the opposite party of the duality within other realms such as Technology and Education; for the case of Baghdad and Dubai, they were the economy and sociology.

The study was based on a mixed method and addressed qualitative data, such as texts, drawings, and images related to the subject, basically of architecture and urban nature. The research perceived qualitative criteria and sought quantitative data for comparison to satisfy and support the analysis and discussion of its findings.

Keywords: utopia, dystopia, Baghdad, Dubai, urban

1. Introduction

Over the last thirty years, Middle Eastern areas have witnessed the rise and fall of major cities; some of them are of historical value, others are of present importance; some managed to survive catastrophic events, such as wars and destruction; others functioned as attractors for people from around the globe.

Cities such as Baghdad obviously live in a chaotic organisation that reached its architecture and urban formation; on the other hand, cities such as Dubai seem to be part of a sophisticated, well-planned city. However, both cities represent a unique phenomenon, demonstrated in construction.

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2. Basic Meanings – A Literature Review

Despite the coined terms of Utopia and Dystopia, the concept of them as a duality was not far from their parted history.

Contemporary cities suffer many drastic and irreversible changes, and there is a deep acceptance of the dominance of dystopia and a great belief in the necessity of utopia. Human societies within cities are forming minor societies, scattered as groups even in the same city. It is possible to find those communities within the most prosperous city and the most miserable city.

2.1. The Terms of (-topia)

Since the appearance of the term Dystopia as a description, and with its opposite prior term, the Utopia and the two terms established a duality. Though it has been assumed that the two terms negate each other, despite the period that separates them, (Gadanho, 2017) discusses that tracking utopia's successes and limits demonstrates that dystopia fulfils its role, as Utopia's opposite, only during the twentieth century.

Studying both terms initiates a series of a play of language on different levels for both of them. According to (Vieira, 2010), in 1516, More presented his imaginary island as Utopia. At that time, the word utopia was a neologism that he created in response to his need for a name to replace his first choice for the name. The first name was the Latin word Nusquama, for (nowhere), (in no place), (on no occasion).

More resorted to two Greek words – ouk (that means not and was reduced to u) and topos (place), to which he added the suffix ia, indicating a place. Though the discussion of the word (Utopia)'s origin leads to the meaning of the nowhere (Vieira, 2010), the nowhere could be read as no-where and now-here, creating the possibility of a vision toward a present instance.

Dystopia was believed to appear as a printed English word in 1782, coined by John Stuart Mill in 1868 (Budakov, 2010). An anonymously published poem, Utopia: Apollo's Golden Days in Dublin, presented the word Dustopia [1]. According to (Budakov, 2010), the copy is dated back to 1747, attributed to Lewis Henry Younge, and presented the word dustopia clearly. A 1748 publication of an excerpted version of the poem, dustopia was corrected to dystopia, with additional explanatory footnotes, clearly defining dystopia as an unhappy country and utopia as its opposite (Budakov, 2010).

A late seventeenth-century dictionary specifies dys as evil, difficult, or impossible, while evil, bad, diffi-cult, and ill are used as qualifiers in dictionary definitions of scientific, predominantly medical, terms starting with this prefix (Budakov, 2010). John Stuart Mill 1868 described dys-topians, or cacotopians, as those who envisage a situation too bad to be practicable (Gadanho, 2017). Which might also be too bad to be accurate.

So apart from -topia being a place, a nowhere does not necessarily be a good place, but a bad place is somewhere that could have been good.

However, (Vieira, 2010) speaks of another neologism, invented by More, derived from Utopia, as a choice to name his island as being (the good place), namely Eutopia. (Vieira, 2010) and (Gadanho, 2017) clarify that the Eu, meaning good, has been added due to the similarity of pronunciation of the Greek U-topia and Eu-topia.

Therefore, More's island is simultaneously a good place and a non-place (Vieira, 2010), and it goes beyond the duality of meaning as mentioned by (Vieira, 2010) for Eutopia is being the other self

of Utopia, which carries the potential of being Bad.

This (subtle play of language)(Gadanho, 2017, p. 28) could be concluded and played along as follows: there is a place where everything is too good to be true, and another place where things are too bad to be true; both of them are no-where/now- here, and between the two, stands the whole human (-topia).

2.2. The Realms of Human (-topia)

In his Utopia, Thomas More presented an ideal form of human organisation (Gadanho, 2017). (Vieira, 2010) explains that when More wrote his Utopia, he was inspired by the letters in which Amerigo Vespucci, Christopher Columbus and Angelo Poliziano described the discovery of new worlds and new peoples, which inevitably implied the discovery of the Other. Therefore (More used the emerging awareness of otherness to legitimise the invention of other spaces, with other people and different forms of organisation) (Vieira, 2010, p. 4).

A simple and quick search in Google around the suffix –topia [2] would engage a range that starts from the uses of the suffix as a name till its variation of its primary engagement with U, where U-topia become a game in a metaverse [3], presenting a whole new world for the player. Actually, the interest in the word utopia has often been developed as the root for forming new words. Words such as alotopia, euchronia, heterotopia, ecotopia and hyperutopia are, in fact, derivation neologisms (Vieira, 2010); some of them are already part of the original construct of the Utopia/Dystopia duality discussion, namely: eutopia, dystopia, anti-utopia.

All these words carry the potential of otherness. Each may represent a potential world, field, domain, activity, or concept with its own human organisation.

In his book, (Claeys, 2011) tracks down the concept of Utopia back through time before and beyond More's book. Though he demonstrates with images certain theological beliefs with images from different cultures, he recognises More's book as a definition of the utopian genre, where More provides social critique, descriptions of political, social and economic systems, and portrays images of the Utopian cities, houses and gardens. Claeys then examines the ideal City, Science fiction, and dedicates a chapter to Dystopia. Throughout the discussion of the book, it was possible to see images and illustrations of fantasies and fiction, maps, planned cities and drawings of buildings, pictures of events, and figures.

(Claeys, 2017) returns with his tracking to utopian thinking to discuss the concept of Dystopia from a political perspective that examines collectivism and totalitarianism after establishing a dystopian space based on religious and psychological, among other prototypes for dystopia.

Though each of these two books approached its own subject from a thematic perspective, they both entailed the depiction in their thematic domain.

From his side, (Mitchell, 1999) spoke of an e-topia, envisioning a transition in the aspect of human life toward digital integration and describing the details of the paradigm shift that occurred during the Technological Revolution while anticipating the future. With the e- prefix, standing for electronic (possibly for economic and ecological as well), e-topia presents a radical change in the thematic prototypes of human organisation.

3. The Simultaneous Presence of the Duality: Utopia/Dystopia

More's work (was, first and foremost, intended to provide a critique of the author's current social and political arrangements) (Gadanho, 2017, p. 27). It was accompanied by a text description of the characteristics of Utopia, the isolated island (Vieira, 2010), and a woodcut map that appeared in Thomas More's Utopia, printed by Dirk Martens in December 1516 (the first edition)[3].

Utopian thinking has two inseparable moments: critique and constructive vision. The critique is of certain aspects of certain present conditions: injustices, oppression, and ecological devastation (Friedmann, 2000). Each of these evils implies a code of moral values being violated. The code may merely be suggested symbolically by invoking slogans such as freedom, equality, and solidarity, therefore indicating the presence of justice (Friedmann, 2000). Hence, it is possible that the potential of the opposites lies within the critique itself; furthermore, the opposite does not

present itself, nor is it represented in the same method as the nemesis.

(Gadanho, 2017) refers to the fact that dystopias are not the same as anti-utopias, which contempt utopian thinking, though it was, in itself, born as utopia's negation. In addition, (Friedmann, 2000) refers to the negative and positive images as being not necessarily symmetrical with respect to each other. He stated: (significant material inequalities are unjust, yet differ vehemently about what might constitute a 'just' distribution of ... good materials) (Friedmann, 2000, p. 463).

In his work, (Gadanho, 2017) discusses how the field of utopian studies was dismissed aggressively with the shift from Modernity toward Postmodernity during the mid-sixties of the twentieth century in the Western context. He explains how the spread of disbelief in utopia resulted in the rise of dystopian narratives and how dystopia's ambiguity made it the prevailing form of critical utopia, resulting in an irony that feeds into utopian tradition. With the dominance of Dystopia (Gadanho, 2017) recommends being explorers into cultural practices who make full use of the utopia/dystopia duality and testing micro-utopias within an encroaching dystopia.

Therefore, it is possible to think of the duality as an inequality of presence, for even when one of them is dominant or prevailed, the second would appear on a different scale and perhaps within a different realm.

In other words, when approaching a kind of visual representation of a realm within utopian thinking, it is expected to perceive where it is possible to extract other realms, regardless of the necessity of an equal visual representation of that other, for at this moment, the critique is activated.

4. Two (-Topia) Cities

In this comparison, the target will be two cities, namely Baghdad and Dubai. There are several reasons to choose these particular cities, such as their geographic location, their natural resources, wealth, and their relations on various levels, but a simple reason could be that one of them is often considered a Utopian city, namely Dubai; At the same time, the other is a city that is witnessing a severe decline after carrying the potential of change toward a new vision, namely Baghdad.

The Methodology of the analysis will aim to deconstruct a visual image by detecting the embedded realms that could be initiated with the perception of that image. The purpose is to demonstrate how a Utopian/Dystopian image carries its nemesis beneath its perceived image. The paper is meant to approach the realm of construction via visual images and go from there to detect other realms.

4.1. Baghdad –Decomposing the Dystopian Image

Baghdad witnessed waves of massive immigration waves from 2003 till the present time for several reasons. Most of the demographic Baghdadi residence areas have changed dramatically following the events that occurred after the invasion of 2003 (Chatelard, 2012) (Al-Aqili & Hadi, 2022), followed by a change in the urban morphology of the city (Al-Hasani, 2012)[4]. This change is marked by an increased population/square kilometres, disregarding any regulations or urban city laws. House plots of 600 square meters and more were divided to accommodate more than one unit instead of keeping the gardens, causing an augmentation in the price of land while people lived in sub-standard conditions.

Within the residential areas, it is not strange to perceive electricity wires and cables hanging here and there like a giant web on every street in the city. Traffic jam is everywhere in the city, and cars are going in the wrong direction on the main streets and roads inside and outside the neighbourhoods. Armed forces are distributed at the entry and exit of the districts. Figure 1

Certain residential areas received immigrants from villages and rural towns, where civic laws have weak effects; as a result, these residential areas suffer from scattered herds of sheep and chickens, and small supermarkets and stacked merchandise are around every corner. It is obvious that the city is abandoning its civic essence in these areas, turning toward what could be called Ruralism.

This image is accompanied by high-rise projects scattered in several areas inside and at the

border areas of the city. As a campaign to solve the increasing population inside the city, these projects are beyond the reach of the majority of Baghdad's current residents because of their increased prices. They are guarded and closed. (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Images from Baghdad: The Construction Realm (author 2022)

4.2. Dubai –Decomposing the Utopian Image

Dubai is a recently growing city, with an age that does not exceed seventy years old, after being a neutral, inactive settlement for almost a century. The city started to grow its wealth during the sixties of the twentieth century [6] and started to increase its actual activity during the mid-eighties [5]. Dubai could be considered the land of experimentation in architectural innovation. It is perceived as the ultimate destination for luxury and leisure, where the world's tallest building, biggest shopping mall, and largest artificial island effectively impacts the global market. It has become a "destination" attraction. It shares such qualities with Las Vegas and Macau (Simpson, 2016).

Furthermore, Dubai has been regarded as a city of a capitalist approach. Its capitalist power is indicated by the Skyscrapers, which are perceived as monumental trademarks, and it shares similarities with New York and Chicago. Dubai has been considered an example to follow by Arabic Gulf city and a phenomenon to study in the academic research (Zaidan & Abulibdeh, 2021).

According to (Simpson, 2016), this city is one of those cities that have produced nothing concrete aside from its built environment, which was mainly erected by non-local intentions to attract non-local workers and tourists.

A study dedicated to the master plan of Dubai reveals a distribution of areas according to wealth, and people with limited fortune are forced to reside in Sharjah and travel to Dubai when needed due to rent prices. The community of Dubai is based on multiple nationalities, with only 17.0% of Emirati. The majority of these nationalities are from the Indian peninsula and South East Asia [5]. These workers suffer severe life and work conditions [7][8].

5. Analysis and Results

Thomas More created his utopia as an isolated island, originally pictured as an isolated island in the middle of the sea, sometimes pictured as a floating island up in the air. It is hard to reach in both ways, if not impossible.

While Dubai is moving to the fantasy/ reality level, Baghdad is moving quickly toward Ruralism, with the absence of law enforcement and restrictions to regulate the behaviour of people.

For the case of Baghdad: The description of the visual criteria of Baghdad presents another

interpretation, where images of the Dystopian Baghdad within the urban formation in the realm of construction trigger indications of what could be called micro-utopias or an Illusion of personal Utopia.

The division of plots indicates the ideal for an Iraqi citizen to own their residence. They would even create a small garden on the street walkway, even though the walkway is a public property. They may cover their façade with marble, for the marble has a longer life as a material, and they may get the perfect car to move around the city, even though they do not have a garage. (Figure 2)

These little (ideal) joys for the current Baghdadi citizen are their way to create their own utopia, no matter how much it adds to the dystopian status.

Furthermore, hanging wires and cables indicate a hidden economic system between the generator owners and the national power supply. However, it also indicates the ideal for a residence in Baghdad to enjoy electricity.

For the case of Dubai: Visualising the Utopian image of Dubai initiates indications that reveal the potential of micro dystopia and could threaten the apparent idealism of the city.

First, the city is embracing a high-technology approach to control the systems in its most sophisticated buildings, which is critical in times of crisis, like minor damage to the power supply.

Though the city recalls the story of Utopia, it nevertheless stands on segregation and/or social hierarchy, which certain elites enjoy. The minority is the national citizens.

The contradiction that could be observed in Dubai is that the buildings have two aspects. First, the designs barely respect the environment (Zaidan & Abulibdeh, 2021); therefore, it could be concluded that there is a high energy consumption rate.

Another contradiction is that designers are trying to give the city an Islamic identity, with some native features reflecting the culture and heritage of the city rather than foreign Fields(Zaidan & Abulibdeh, 2021).

6. Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to determine how the duality of utopia/dystopia, following visual criteria, is represented by identifying the potentials and the presence of one part of the duality within the other that may enable the reader from deconstructing the systems to reveal the other part of the duality, despite its scale of presence or effect, as an embedded potential in the opposite, while approaching both as realms within a larger organisation and reading them within an inevitable hierarchy.

The message the paper is trying to convey is that there is always an escape from the now/here on both sides of the duality, and there is always a presence of the opposite that could break the upper realms when the minor presence of other realms is revealed.

Figure 2. Images from Baghdad: The Construction Realm (author 2022)

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Endnotes

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