

# Utopia and Dystopia: From Narration to Architecture<sup>1</sup>

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“Those who promised us paradise on earth never produced anything but a hell.”

—Karl Popper

## Introduction

It is difficult to consider utopia and dystopia as the same phenomenon in the real world. In the narrative world, however, they are configured much closer to each other. If someone considers the theatre as a metaphor for human society, then utopia would be the acts performed on a stage, whereas dystopia would be that which occurs along the periphery in support of a scene. Utopia is a vast subject involving the varied disciplines of philosophy, literature, political science, social studies, urban development, and architecture. The only way we can fully comprehend why utopia is an idea that could all too easily lead to dystopia is by studying it through the lens of various academic streams.

In the design world, utopia has always concerned architects and urban designers as a way of solving problems and improve human life. Nobody sets out to create dystopia, yet it is an interesting subject for the dramatic arts because an imbalanced situation is a good starting place for storytelling.

Using examples from mythology, fictions, philosophy, utopian cities, and architecture, case studies scrutinize the aspects of utopian ethos that represent the closeness of “positive utopia and negative utopia”<sup>2</sup> from the mythological to the philosophical mindset.

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this article was published in a students’ journal on architecture. See Ali Reza Shahbazin’s “Utopia and Dystopia” in *Paper - M* (Savannah: LULU, 2017) 26.

<sup>2</sup> Erich Fromm in his afterward for *1984* used the term “negative utopia” instead of “dystopia.”

## Tower of Babel

In Abrahamic religions, the creation of a utopia on earth by people is forbidden because the notion of heaven is a gift to the faithful after their temporal existence on this planet ends. The narrative of the Tower of Babel depicts this notion clearly. Although the Tower of Babel story is an etiology about the origins of the multiplicity of languages, it could also tell us about the prohibition of utopianism as one of the essentials of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

According to the *Bible*, and mentioned briefly in the *Quran*, a generation speaking a single language built a giant tower<sup>3</sup> in Shinar<sup>4</sup> to reach Heaven itself. Genesis 11:1–9 mentions, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves.... But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building.”<sup>5</sup> God then destroyed the tower and gave everyone a separate language. For this reason, the city was thereafter called Babylon. The tower was transformed into a dystopia, a place for war because people could no longer understand each other.

This famous story does not clearly indicate what was wrong in this city and its tower that made God concerned. In God’s point of view, something was clearly wrong with either the tower or the city or both.<sup>6</sup> Other sources such as *The Book of Jubilees* cite the ambitions of the urban elite to overtake heaven as the reason for God’s punishment.<sup>7</sup> Even though God punished the citizens for their arrogant attitudes, this story is also about the prohibition of utopianism. Apart from their arrogance, the rebels thought that they could create an earthly heaven or reach heaven while still living.

Utopia is the concept of an earthly heaven, a perfect city made by imperfect people in contrast to the omnipotent God’s heaven. This concept reveals the desire for perfection as represented by utopia and the creation of a different world could be a great sin. The Tower of Babel’s theme of humans clashing with God also echoes the story of the fall of Adam and Eve.

In the *Legends of Jews* by Louis Ginsberg (1903–1990), it is mentioned that, according to an early Talmudic commentary, the serpent said to Eve in the garden, “He [God] Himself ate first of the fruit of the tree, and then He created the world. Therefore doth He forbid you to eat

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<sup>3</sup> Isaac Asimov in his book, *Asimov's Guide to the Bible*, speculates that the narrative was probably inspired by Sumerian mythology and the ziggurats in Sumer.

<sup>4</sup> Covering parts of present-day Iraq and Syria.

<sup>5</sup> *King James Bible*, “Book of Genesis” (Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 20.

<sup>6</sup> See Brent A. Strawn, “Focus on Tower of Babel” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, eds. J.W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> See *The Book of Jubilees*, trans. R. H. Charles (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1917), 77.

thereof, lest you create other worlds. Everyone knows that ‘artisans of the same guild hate one another,’”<sup>8</sup> By this argument, Satan seduced Eve and Adam into eating the forbidden fruit and creating another world.

The real reason that caused the fall of Adam and Eve was not the forbidden fruit but rather the desire to create another world, a better one, a utopia. The story shows that God always wanted to control humans’ ambitions and creativity so that heaven would remain the main utopia. The aspirations of humans for creating a utopia even while they were already living in one were at the core of the original sin in Abrahamic faiths. It may be argued then as to why so many Christian scholars have tried, at least in theory, to create utopian cities? Those theories and prototypes, even in Islam, are mainly derived from the classical Athenian intellectual tradition rather than the early Christian and Islamic doctrines.<sup>9</sup>

Although the Tower of Babel is not the paramount story in the Quran, the prohibition of utopianism can be interpreted in Islamic epistemology and in Sufi texts and architecture. As Ghazali (1058-1111)<sup>10</sup> said, “The visible world was made to correspond to the invisible and there is nothing in this world but is a symbol of something in that other world.”<sup>11</sup>

Or in Rumi’s<sup>12</sup> (1207–1273) poem:

“Therefore, while in form thou art the microcosm,  
in reality thou art the macrocosm.”<sup>13</sup>

These reference works by many historians and critics show that Islamic art has been derived from the image of Paradise.<sup>14</sup> In Islamic tradition, the perfect world as utopia already exists as heaven and so the ambition to remake shows ingratitude. Islamic architecture and cities are not a utopia; instead, they are only a mirror of utopia. Islamic edifices are not heaven, yet they are still the image of the heaven in their details. For instance, the poetic location of the

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<sup>8</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 71.

<sup>9</sup> Erich Fromm in his afterward for *1984* apart from Greek and Roman thinking includes the Messianic concept of the *Old Testament* prophets for the bases of the utopian vision, too.

<sup>10</sup> Abū Hāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, a Persian theologian, jurist, philosopher, and mystic.

<sup>11</sup> Muḥammad Ghazali, *Revival of Religious Sciences*, trans. Margaret Smith (Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc., 1987), 111.

<sup>12</sup> Persian poet, jurist, Islamic scholar, theologian, and Sufi mystic

<sup>13</sup> Jalalu’l-Din Rumi, *Rumi: Poet and Mystic*, trans. Nicholson, Reynold A (London: Oneworld Publications Ltd, 1995), 124.

<sup>14</sup> See Nayer Tahoori, “The Image of Heaven in Islamic Arts of Iran” in *International Journal of Architecture and Urban Development*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Tehran: Islamic Azad University Press, 2013), 13-16.

water pool in Islamic architecture illustrates the belief that earthly beauty is but a reflection of an eminent beauty created by God in the heavens. This cannot be achieved by an architect who strives for utopian perfection. The water pool functions as a mirror for the heavenly beauty so the image in the water is not a reflection of the architecture. On the contrary, architecture is the reflection of the building in the pool against the backdrop of the skies.

Henry Corbin<sup>15</sup> (1903–1978) used the term “Imago-magi,” magical image, for Islamic Persian architecture, in his article, *Emblematic Cities*.<sup>16</sup> Corbin considers a mosque as a terrestrial temple that is a projection of a celestial temple in heaven. “The lowest or material world reflects not only the world immediately above it but the world of the spirit which stands at the highest level in the hierarchy of being below the source, the Origin. A symbol stands as close a relationship to the source as the leaves of a tree to its roots.”<sup>17</sup>

This is the main difference that outraged God towards the generation who built the Tower of Babel because the tower was not a symbolic image or a mirror of utopia: it was made to be utopia and an alternative for heaven.

The God of Abraham believes that two heavens cannot exist as identical object cannot occupy the same space in the cosmos. One must always be the projection of the other and the human thirst for perfection should be quenched due to the imperfections of human nature and tools. Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) in his short story, *Parable of the Palace*, set within mythological time and space illustrates this concept. A Chinese emperor shows a poet his majestic palatial estate with its many towers and gardens like a labyrinth. The poet then composes a short poem that the whole place is entrapped at which point the palace disappears because “There cannot be any two things alike in the world.”<sup>18</sup>

Symbolism of earthly life as the projection and image of eternal life in Islamic tradition and mysticism is combined with Abrahamic monotheism as an Islamic adaptation of Plato’s (427–347 B.C.E.) *Allegory of the Cave*. Islamic philosophy was heavily influenced by Plato from

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<sup>15</sup> French philosopher and orientalist best known as a major interpreter of the Persian role in the development of Islamic thought.

<sup>16</sup> See Henry Corbin, “Introduction: Emblematic Cities” in *Isfahan: Spiegel des Paradieses* by Henri Stierlin (Berlin: Atlantis, 1976).

<sup>17</sup> Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar *The Sense of Unity, The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1973), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Dreamtigers*, trans. Boyer, Mildred, Morland, Harold (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 45.

the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Philosophers like Al-Farabi<sup>19</sup> (872–950) worked on Plato’s concept of utopia to create a political philosophy that could reach a compromise with Islamic traditions.<sup>20</sup> Although Plato’s ideal city is the first utopia in philosophical mindset instead of a mythological one, he pursued the Abrahamic God’s tradition of utopia as controlling and asserting censorship in *The Republic*.

### **Kallipolis**

The ideal state for Plato is delineated in his book *The Republic* as Kallipolis, a beautiful city. Plato, akin to Prometheus, gave humans something that could warm and burn simultaneously. He sketched an ideal society in which some aspects of it are scintillating, such as rulers must be philosophers without private property and the dominance of public spirit. Yet it has a dark side, too, like a caste society, marriages arranged by the government, and the exclusion of poets as part of control and censorship.<sup>21</sup> Plato, similar to the Abrahamic God, knew that in order to have a permanent utopia, the first rule is to not tolerate any alternative versions. Plato believed that poets, dramatists, and artists are hazardous to utopia since art “...as we experience it, is an illusion, a collection of mere appearances like reflections in a mirror or shadows on a wall.”<sup>22</sup> For Plato, art is misleading and a hallucinatory version of reality. Based on all of this, Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) said Plato created systematic censorship:

“There is to be a rigid censorship, from very early years, over the literature to which the young have access and the music they are allowed to hear. Mothers and nurses are to tell their children only authorized stories.... Plays, therefore, if permissible at all, must contain no characters except faultless male heroes of good birth. The impossibility of this is so evident that Plato decides to banish all dramatis from his city.”<sup>23</sup>

By allowing censorship in all forms, Plato kills art and literature, as George Orwell (1903–1950) said, “Loss of liberty is inimical to all forms of literature.”<sup>24</sup> So by this, it is worth wondering, “Was Plato the first utopian philosopher, or the designer of the first dystopia?”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Persian philosopher and jurist who wrote in the fields of political philosophy, metaphysics, ethics and logic.

<sup>20</sup> See Thérèse-Anne Druart “Philosophy in Islam.” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A. S. McGrade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> See Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse “Truth and Representation” in *Philosophical Aesthetics*, eds. Oswald Hanfling (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 250.

<sup>23</sup> Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 1967), 109–110.

<sup>24</sup> George Orwell “The Prevention of Literature” in *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1950).

<sup>25</sup> Franco Borsi *Architecture and Utopia*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (Paris: Hazan Editeur, 1997), 19.

Lewis Mumford (1895–1990) said, “He [Plato] had set a bad precedent for all later utopian writers in this respect,”<sup>26</sup> which could also be traced into the utopian architecture.

“Whereas Plato’s modeled Republic was governed by philosophers, Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) later suggested that Jupiter, obliged to reconstruct the world, confided it to architects rather than philosophers.”<sup>27</sup> Alberti believed in a more objective utopia as opposed to Plato, projecting it as a vocation for architects instead of philosophers, which is why, “In almost every instance, a utopia conceived by architects is a formal utopia.”<sup>28</sup>

Although Alberti was more interested in multiplicity than Plato in his vision, Plato exerts an influence on Albert’s ideas about the role of authority for a changeless society and “no more than Plato would Alberti open the floodgates to innovation: If laws were to be respected they could be altered only very rarely.”<sup>29</sup>

The Plutonian pattern can also be traced in some ideal Renaissance cities such as *The City of Sun* by Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639), which as a utopian fiction had a geometric vision with details. Some policies of The City of Sun are more socially progressive than in Plato’s utopia, such as omitting a rigid caste system or design-wise like the walls were painted and represented an urban encyclopedia and an open culture including all the arts and sciences. In contrast, Campanella’s city, a utopia ruled by love, has dark side such as confession is obligatory, thoughts should be controlled, even names of the newborn should be chosen by a director and so on.<sup>30</sup>

The City of Sun was concentric and radial in its layout. “[City] divided into seven circular zones...The concentric rings are fortified by circular walls and above them is a temple built with wondrous art.”<sup>31</sup> The issue is not with the circle itself; the issue is with the ideology which misapplies the potentials of a geometry.

The City of Sun from the Late Renaissance Italy is similar to some of its predecessors’ utopian cities with identical architectural mechanisms like *Sforzinda*, a utopian visionary city with similar radial plan designed by Antonio di Pietro Averlino (1400–1469) known as Filarete, a Florentine Renaissance architect. Although some aspects of the design of the *Sforzinda* were

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<sup>26</sup> Borsi, *Architecture and Utopia*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Borsi, *Architecture and Utopia*, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

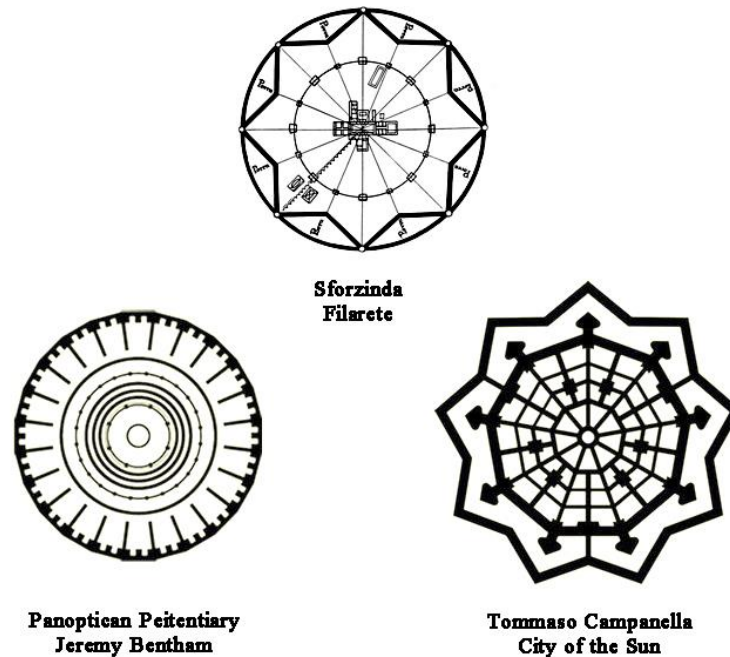
<sup>29</sup> Frank Edward Manuel and Fritzie Prigohzy, *Manuel Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 158.

<sup>30</sup> See Campanella, Tommaso, *The City of Sun* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2007).

<sup>31</sup> Borsi, *Architecture and Utopia*, 20.

probably influenced by talismanic shapes and astrology, they were also derived by an ideology that represented the centralized power of a monarchial system.<sup>32</sup>

*The City of Sun* and *Sforzinda* designs are flagrantly identical to Jeremy Bentham's (1748–1832) design for the permanent surveillance of the Panopticon<sup>33</sup> penitentiary.<sup>34</sup>



“Bentham's Panopticon is the architectural figure of this composition. We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the center, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building.... All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a

<sup>32</sup> Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, 160.

<sup>33</sup> Panopticon is based on Argus Panoptes Greek mythology, a many-eyed monster.

<sup>34</sup> Emanuel Dimas de Melo Pimenta *Low Power Society: Continuous Hyperconsumption and the End of the Middle Class in a Hyperurban Planet* (Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), 264.

patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy.... The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately.”<sup>35</sup>

Michael Foucault (1926–1984) depicts that how controlling works in this architectural mechanism consciously and unconsciously could transform prisoners as the objects of a “Visible trap.” The similarity of these ideological-driven structures represent that controlling is the essence of the design and designers’ vision. Bentham had this idea that his ideal circular prison could also be practical for schools, hospitals, factories, and so on, so Foucault disclosed “this is the utopia of the perfectly governed city.”<sup>36</sup>

In *1984*, by Orwell, a dystopian novel, Orwellian notions such as “double think” show the apotheosis of identical architectural Panopticon structures that are employed at the psychological and linguistic levels in a negative utopia. The novel *1984* is not about humans’ clash with God. Instead, the story is about how humans clash with a tyrannical government, a regime that wants to control the language in order to control the thoughts.

In *1984*, Big Brother, the party leader, defines everything, even the truth, with techniques like “double thinking.” “Double think means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously and accepting both of them. In a successful manipulation of the mind, the person is no longer saying the opposite of what he thinks, but he thinks the opposite of what is true.”<sup>37</sup>

As Erich Fromm (1900–1980) said that the main question in *1984* is can human nature be changed? This is the same question for all utopias, heaven, Kallipolis, *The City of Sun*, *Sforzinda*, Panopticon penitentiary, and *1984*. This scene from the novel shows the double think concept: “It was an enormous pyramidal structure of glittering white concrete, soaring up, terrace after terrace, 300 meters into the air. From where Winston stood it was just possible to read, picked out on its white face in elegant lettering, the three slogans of the Party:

WAR IS PEACE

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH.”<sup>38</sup> Or, it could be summarized in DYSTOPIA IS UTOPIA.

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Foucault *Discipline and Punish, the Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 197.

<sup>36</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 198.

<sup>37</sup> Erich Fromm, “AFTERWORD to George Orwell’s *1984*,” *1984* by George Orwell (New York: New American Library, 1962.), 263.

<sup>38</sup> George Orwell, *1984* (New York: New American Library, 1962) 5.



The three slogans of the party are an attempt, like all utopias, to destroy dualism in humans, and the main question still is could utopia demolish the dualism in humans? This question may seem like a yes or no question; however, the answer is not as simple as yes or no.

The necessity and impossibility of translation is the Jacques Derrida's (1930–2004) interpretation of the Tower of Babel.<sup>39</sup> The translation could also be substituted by using Utopia. Thinking about utopia as a social, political, and architectural atmosphere that is much more enticing than the current ones is a crucial critical function as a necessity; however, practicing it carries its own risks or as Franz Kafka (1883–1924) said, “If it had been possible to build the tower of Babel without ascending it, the work would have been permitted.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See Jacques Derrida ‘Des Tours de Babel,’ in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>40</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, trans. Nahum Norbet Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971), 270.