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## INTERVIEW WITH DAVID PINDER

The following is an interview with David Pinder, the author of *Visions of the City: Utopianism, Power and Politics in Twenty-Century Urbanism*, in the form of a conversation between the author and Bob Biderman, the editor of *Visions of the City* Magazine held in November 2007.

***What I liked most about your book was your refusal to accept what's easy to fall into, the idea that dystopia is a far more relevant analytical tool for addressing cities than utopia (which smacks of sugarplums and fairy dust). Why does it currently seem so hard to take utopian visions seriously? What might be the value of re-evaluating and re-awakening utopian imaginations?***

One of the difficulties of talking about utopias today is that, as you hint, they can seem too fanciful or irrelevant in the context of current urban problems. They can appear like a distraction from facing up to the realities of contemporary cities with all their inequalities and multiple crises of deprivation, violence, political oppression and the such. In this context it's easy to see why dystopias might be seen as more relevant, timely and imaginable, with their concern about puncturing current complacencies and underlining the urgency of responding radically to current economic, political and cultural conditions and trends. Another difficulty about utopias, almost the obverse from the other one, is that they are frequently dismissed for being authoritarian or even totalitarian, for supposedly setting up a fixed ideal to which society must be then molded. Many critics have therefore assailed utopias and utopian thought for being repressive and murderous, as being to blame for many of the horrors of the twentieth century and as necessarily becoming dystopian in its results. As a consequence there's been much talk of the 'end of utopia' alongside concerted efforts to convince, as Margaret Thatcher famously put it, and as many in positions of power have continued to echo, that 'there is no alternative' to present economic and political arrangements.

It was in that broad context that I wanted to reconsider utopian visions of cities from twentieth-century Europe. Partly this was to examine critically influential strands of utopianism that have done much to shape the discourses and practices of modern urban planning and architecture, and consequently the building of actual cities. This led me to explore their politics, desires and 'dark sides', if you like, against tendencies to see them as 'technical' interventions. But I also wanted to draw out contrasting utopian visions – what might be described as 'counter-traditions' – with which they were entangled, and which sought quite different routes. Here my focus was on the surrealists and especially the situationists as well as figures such as the philosopher Henri Lefebvre. To speak of their positions as utopian clearly involves moving away from the idea that utopianism is necessarily about projecting plans and blueprints. It requires recognising that it takes different forms and can have different functions – as critique, as the education of desire, as a striving to expand senses of possibility, as a catalyst for social change. It can also be rooted in everyday life and spaces, and in the desire to transform them for the better. In the book I try to contextualise the

ideas and practices historically and geographically but at the same time my aim, in returning to aspects of the recent past, is to focus attention on utopianism and its potential functions for enabling radical change. In so doing I've also been influenced by the reconceptualisation of utopianism that's been going on within utopian studies. Like a number of people involved with that, my historical interest in studying utopias is connected with an interest in advocating it as an approach and method for thinking about alternatives.

***In all great movements of art, philosophy, literature isn't there a reaction to hurt and injustice and a craving for a world made anew? A craving for utopia? Not in the literal sense of the word – the sense that is used in ordinary dialogue. More the sense in which you use it - as a signpost, a marker, something to aim for. Don't all great movements come from despair and seek some sort of solace?***

That often seems the case. John Holloway, the political theorist and activist, writes about how radical theory starts with 'a scream', a sense of anger and horror at the state of the world, a feeling that things are not right and just. It proceeds from that gut instinct rather than a detached, contemplative position. In much utopianism the urge to negate is coupled with the desire for things to be different and better: the sense that something's missing and that the world should and can be changed. In that desire for change there's not only despair and the search for solace, then, but also at least the flicker of hope. That's important if utopias are to include a willful drive to make a difference and be more than compensatory. Certainly, in the urban tradition, the terrible conditions of cities have often been a spur not only to reformist action but also for utopian projects. I think there's a risk, though, of romanticising conditions of hurt and despair as the spur to 'great works'. When thinking about political movements there's also a question of the sources, for example, of the surge of utopian thinking within leftist movements in North America and Europe during the 1960s. Alongside the struggles against war and for civil rights there's a real sense of optimism in attempts to seize and realize the possibilities of the times.

***Visions are – have been, certainly after Einstein – relativistic. You have a wonderful bit where you compare the first vision of New York, seen from afar, by Le Corbusier and Dali. Dali sees it as a great hunk of Roquefort and Corbusier sees it as the white city. Both are right and both are wrong. (I love it when you talk about – or Dali talks about – the great towers in New York being sprayed with scum so they were able to fit in with the sooty appearance that defined Manhattan while in Paris, the towers were built glistening white to conform to their idealized image of modern New York. That says a lot about competing utopias.) But that also is New York seen naively from afar. Seen from within, there were my grandparents living in a Delancey Street tenement. Their abode was seen as dirty, cruel and nasty by those who lived uptown. But to my grandparents, who came from even worse conditions and saw America as their utopian dream, the tenements were home. They were a sanctuary. To Corbusier it was simply a slum to be hopefully replaced someday by a gleaming tower if he had anything to do with it.***

Yes, when someone like Le Corbusier – or, in the same New York context but wielding more prac-

tical power, someone like the public works commissioner Robert Moses – denounces urban disorder and calls for the creation of order, it's important to ask whose order? Whose interests are to be served? Who is to be on the receiving end when Moses makes his notorious comment, 'When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat axe'? What you say about the disparity between perspectives brings to mind the famous attack on urban planning by Jane Jacobs in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, from 1961. Writing in New York and targeting the utopian schemes of people like Le Corbusier, Howard and the City Beautiful Movement that she saw as having a disastrous influence on planning practice at the time, she argued they failed to recognize the intricate order and pattern of daily life in the city streets. They ignored or suppressed that as they sought to impose their own abstract conceptualizations of order. Attending to that street life was an important basis of her resistance to Moses, then remaking the city with his highway constructions.

***I find it fascinating that you used Lefebvre and Constant as your guides through the utopian miasma. The COBRA group, of which I suspect Lefebvre was an honorary member, was one of the most important and little studied post-war artistic movements leaving hardly a mark in the English speaking world. What I loved about COBRA is how they separated themselves off from the mainstream of European intelligentsia and tried to find their own path. I go to the COBRA museum in Amstelveen like some people go to Lourdes or Mecca. My feeling about COBRA, however, is that it's very much rooted in the resistance struggles during WWII. Those who survived the traumas went on to demand the world be made anew. There was a harking back to the innocence of childhood. Line, shape and form were all re-envisioned. The boundaries of genre were removed. Poetry, painting, sculpture were interwoven. But they were there and then they weren't. How long was it? Five, six, seven years? No matter. They weren't to be institutionalised. (They didn't seek immortality.) But they certainly had their effect on Amsterdam – if only through the Stedelijk (or what's left of it). How about Copenhagen? Or Brussels? Is there a residual memory that permeates through, even though the culture shifts and time dulls the senses?***

I've similarly long been struck by the lack of attention that COBRA has received in English-speaking contexts, beyond the notable work of a few art historians such as Graham Birtwistle and Peter Shield. It's a remarkable movement whose formal existence actually spanned only 1948 to 1951, although it does seem longer. When a large-scale exhibition finally came to Britain in 2002, it visited the Baltic gallery at Gateshead but tellingly never made it further south before its passage to Dublin. I keep wondering when the UK will see a major exhibition on, for example, Jorn not to mention Constant. There's a small group of COBRA paintings in the Tate Modern in London that includes Constant's 'Après nous la liberté', from 1949. Interestingly in terms of our conversation here, Constant originally entitled it 'To us, liberty'. But after the break up of COBRA and his own disillusionment about the prospects of 'free art' within the oppressive conditions of post-war capitalist society, he gave it the present title. In the process he was clearly not giving up on the prospects of freedom but viewing them as dependent upon a revolutionary break with current conditions that was itself within reach, something that he went on to explore and seek to encourage through his extraordinary utopian New Babylon project that occupied him throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, and that was a key focus of my book.

I, too, love visiting the COBRA museum. The Jorn museum at Silkeborg is also wonderful. Having said that, my own interest in COBRA is especially in its aftermath and what became of some of its protagonists, in particular Constant as he forged a new path during the 1950s that left behind individualised models of painting that eventually led him back into contact with Jorn, first through the latter's International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus and then through the Situationist International. In relation to the latter group, the neglect of COBRA movement in English speaking settings that you refer to has been matched by sidelining of the Scandinavian wing of the situationist movement and the so-called Second Situationist International. While the Guy Debord has become the subject of numerous biographical studies, the roles in the movement of situationists such as Jorn, Jacqueline de Jong, J.V. Martin, Jørgen Nash and others have received little attention. I hope that will soon change and there are signs it will. There was a conference this year in Copenhagen on the Scandinavian situationists, for example, and in Britain Stewart Home and Fabian Tompsett have been strong advocates for the significance of Jorn and the Second Situationist International from outside academia, publishing during the 1990s some of his short situationist-era texts.

How can we gauge the impact of such figures and movements on particular places? Many of the effects are no doubt subterranean and indirect although nonetheless important for that. Even when ideas and movements seem to lie dormant or suppressed, they may re-emerge or be re-awakened as they chime with different contexts or are mobilized for other purposes. Ten years after Constant finished work on New Babylon and went back to painting, he gave a talk that looked back on his utopian urban project, which he noted was now 'safely stored away in a museum, waiting for more favourable times when it will once again arouse interest'. This might seem a resigned statement about the co-optation by the artistic establishment of a project that was clearly meant to go beyond such institutions, to be part of revolutionary movements. But I also take it as an invitation to think about what the work might mean to us today. How might it be approached in ways that don't simply deaden its utopian spirit? To what new projects might the histories of such endeavours speak? What might we make of his insistence, and the prodigious artistic energy that he devoted to this end, that other urban worlds and ways of living are possible?

One issue within academic studies of these materials is that, due to disciplinary specialisms, the 'art historical' or 'architectural' interests at times get separated from the social theoretical and from the political. That's why I think it's valuable to link Constant and Lefebvre together, for example, not only due to the historical links and cross-currents of influences between them, but also because it helps to keep in focus their radical political commitments. The geographer Erik Swyngedouw talks of the 'strange respectability of the situationist city in the society of the spectacle' and of the ways in which a profoundly revolutionary project has become part of academic and art establishment discourse. He's right, of course, and it's something that I've often thought about in writing on these matters myself. Yet it's also the case that these ideas and practices are in increasingly wide circulation, and addressing them and considering what to make of them are not insignificant matters. They are certainly not 'dead' and coming to terms with their histories is of political as well as intellectual importance.

***London, of course, is a fascinating city that defies straightforward analysis. I took a French friend who was visiting from Paris to the café atop the Tate Modern so that he might appreciate how truly ugly London could appear. His response was that the architectural chaos and helter-skelter planning was a pleasant antidote to the tedious symmetry you see from atop the Eiffel Tower. Does this theme of order vs chaos or symmetry***

***vs randomization play a major role in all utopian ideas? And do any utopian ideas incorporate both?***

Many utopian visions of cities are indeed calls to order. They often focus, in particular, on spatial order as a means of dealing with social and urban problems more widely. We were just referring to Le Corbusier and how his urban schemes from the 1920s and 1930s most vividly embody the demands to clean up, reorder, purify. But so do many others, including in a more gentle way the garden city of Ebenezer Howard. Expel wastes and pollutants that would compromise the integrity of the new spaces, get rid of contaminations and chaotic intrusions. Part of the reason why such visions have been so powerful is their appeal to apparently universal, timeless values of geometry, symmetry and visual clarity as well as their use of organic metaphors whereby their actions become a way of restoring health and wholeness to the ravaged urban body. But again a vital question is whose order?

The landscape in Paris that your friend reacts negatively to is, of course, the result in part of the grand public works under Haussmann, which involved blasting boulevards through the old working class districts and demolishing medieval quarters in the 1850s and 1860 with the aim of opening up and reordering the city. They remade the city for the circulation of traffic, air, people and capital, as well as facilitated the policing of the population. Even at the time they were often criticized for supposedly deadening the life of the streets and rendering them boring, devoid of surprises, as well as for destroying 'old Paris' and displacing huge numbers of people along class lines to create new segregations. Yet avoiding the authoritarian hand of planners and builders doesn't necessarily mean avoiding authoritarian ordering processes, as the market and capitalist development function that way too. What might seem random is produced through creative and destructive forces of capital investment and disinvestment in conjunction with the actions of planners, citizen struggles and the like. I think that's worth stressing as it sometimes seemed forgotten in the chorus of criticisms directed at utopian planners and their 'totalizing' schemes that grew in strength from the 1970s, especially with the rise of a 'postmodern' urbanism and architecture whose avowedly anti-utopian stance frequently involved embracing the market and commercial interests. Constant's New Babylon project is interesting in relation to your question about order vs chaos, though, since he rejects the kinds of static order often associated with urban utopias and seems to embrace instead a kind of chaotic flux. Through models and drawings he outlines these giant megastructures but stresses that everything within them is fluid and changing, all the components are perpetually being modified including walls, stairs, climates, atmospheres. This particularly comes through in his drawings and paintings with their swirling and clashing lines. However, the important point for him is that the environment is continually recreated by the residents themselves. Unlike utopian designers mapping out the perfect space, he imagines people freed from the binds of work and toil and finally able to expend their creative energy through play and through the creation and recreation of their own spaces. In that sense the spatial form of the new urbanism can't be known in advance of the actions that will produce and reproduce it.

***There is the symbolism of walls that you deal with quite interestingly. In the very beginning of your book you discuss the utopian visions of the Letterists. The notion of barriers, protection, isolation comes through vividly in the images and descriptions. Walls and utopias seem to exist side by side. Walls keep some things in and other things out – like semi-permeable membranes. City walls offer protection Walls can also be ghettos.***

***Utopia for some is tearing down walls – and for others it is putting them up. Lisa Selvidge in her piece on the Berlin Wall, writes of its psychosexuality. Helena Walsh makes use of the Wailing Wall in her piece on Jerusalem. How far can we go with this? Is it simply a metaphor or is there something more basic?***

Walls, borders and boundaries are indeed important in many utopias, given their emphasis on spatial ordering. As you say, the role of these walls is often ambiguous, both protective and restrictive. We might think here of the importance of the perimeter in Thomas More's vision of the island of Utopia from 1516, which is rugged and fortified with a treacherous entrance. Turreted walls, ditches and moats also surround the cities. These strong walls and boundaries ensure the purity of the harmonious space inside and allow threats and contaminations to be kept at bay. That is a classic utopian image. But in dramatic contrast are the moving and fluid walls of Constant's urban vision that I just mentioned, where there's a conscious attempt to challenge notions of exclusion and regulation in favour of a generalized process of liberation in which people will create their own environments in correspondence with their life play. The latter connects with a range of avant-garde architectural experimentation from the 1960s that challenges the authority of walls and the idea of the architect as a creator of order and form.

There's a disturbing footnote to be added here though, which indicates how critical ideas and visions can be appropriated for other ends. In his remarkable new book *Hollow Land*, the architect Eyal Weizman examines the spaces created by Israel's occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, and tells a extraordinary story about how a research unit within the Israeli Defense Forces used critical theory to inform its understanding of urban warfare. One of their key tactics, employed in Nablus in April 2002 to manoeuvre through the city in order to kill members of the Palestinian resistance, was what they called 'walking through walls': literally blasting through the walls of private homes using explosives or hammers, and detaining the residents while then blasting through the other side. It was a means of moving through space to reach the enemy without using the conventional urban syntax of streets, alleys and courtyards that were perceived as dangerous. In passing through walls and borders as if they no longer mattered, the army spoke approvingly of creating 'smooth spaces', a term taken from Deleuze and Guattari, in place of the 'striated space' associated with the walls, roadblocks, ditches and the like that characterized Palestinian areas. Weizman also discusses the development of methods and technologies to allow soldiers to see and shoot through walls. Besides Deleuze and Guattari, the unit's 'operational theory' curriculum included Tschumi, Debord and the situationists. It's strange to imagine the military reading these theorists, although perhaps it's not so surprising in itself given that a number of the theorists in turn drew on military thinking. Debord, for example, was fascinated with Clausewitz, Sun Tzu and war games. The real importance of the theory for the military, Weizman argues, was as a means of reorganising itself and speaking to itself and others. But it still casts a different light on the desire to undermine solid structures and walls apparent in critiques of capitalist urbanism by the situationists and Constant, as ideas and practices conceived as part of a project to subvert power in cities are reworked in order to project power with devastating consequences for the citizens concerned.

***In his article, Alphaville Exists, Chris Darke discusses the gated communities in Brazil where the workers – the maids, the gardeners, the cleaners – are under constant scrutiny, their every move recorded and archived. Does the idea of safety for a certain class mean oppression for another? More widely, what do we make of contemporary urban archi-***

***ecture and surveillance that responds to the threat, real or perceived, of others? Public buildings, public places, are now special zones where space is patrolled through various technological means.***

I look forward to reading Chris's article, for that theme certainly resonates with wider process of urban restructuring at the moment. There's a tendency for cities to become increasingly segmented and patchwork-like, divided into zones that are close by physically but worlds apart socially and institutionally. Gated communities can be seen as an example of this alongside a range of exclusive spaces such as spectacular malls, waterfront developments, luxury holiday complexes and so on. Discourses of safety and security are frequently used to justify a whole series of measures of surveillance, sorting, exclusion and control that are important in the production and reproduction of these spaces. Yet the greater the levels of exclusion, it seems, the more heightened become the fears. In discussing such spaces I've found Louis Marin's term 'utopic degeneration' useful, where it indicates a kind of displacement of utopian desires for urban change into something that is turned inwards, cut off from surrounding areas, no longer intent on affecting wider change.

I'm currently getting increasingly interested in these issues of surveillance myself and especially in the video surveillance of public space, for which the UK has the dubious honour of being world capital, and about which there has been disconcertingly little critical public debate. Surveillance is actually a common theme in many utopias historically, with transparency being seen as an important means of maintaining order and harmony. For example, the residents of More's island of Utopia are meant to live in full view of all, with no chances for idleness, corruption and secret meetings. In James Silk Buckingham's nineteenth-century ideal town of Victoria, an important influence on Howard's garden city, everything is visible so there are 'no secret and obscure haunts for the retirement of the filthy and the immoral from the public eye'. The current obsession with the video surveillance of public space seems to give new form to such dreams of transparency. Only it's the targeted public spaces that must be rendered visible so that people can be categorized, sifted and tracked. Meanwhile other spaces – the control rooms where the monitoring is taking place – are opaque, disconnected and out of reach in another location entirely.

***There's been quite a bit of research on the East End as an entry point for migrants and as a laboratory in the study of the processes of assimilation. In the late 19th century, the East End was the most densely populated piece of real estate in Europe. It was the most expensive per square metre. But it also was the poorest per capita. In the 1880s there used to be tours run by companies to show middle-class visitors what it was like to live in the urban jungle. The tours were probably similar to ones where white Europeans were taken into black African tribal villages to see where missionaries had supposedly been cooked and eaten. The Jewish ghettos of London's East End, however, housed a rich cultural mix that thrived on communal living patterns. Certainly there was plenty of misery and hunger. But, in the main, the ideas of the social reformers were based on notions having more to do with British colonial attitudes of the time, than on a more accurate understanding that came, for example, from books like Zangwill's Children of the Ghetto. Didn't the utopian ideas of social reformers like William Morris often suffer from perceptual flaws that even for radicals like him were trapped in the notions of Empire?***

Not only imperial imaginations we might add, although what you say is very interesting in relation to explorations of the 'terra incognitae' of the East End and their subsequent importance for urban planning imaginaries, but also assumptions about gender and much more. Yes, utopian texts and works are always situated in particular contexts and they, therefore, reflect to some degree the circumstances in which they were constructed. That's one of the interesting things about studying utopias, I think, since their struggles to imagine a break with the present and to outline other worlds can tell us much about the conditions of the time, and about the structural impediments on imagining and realizing the world otherwise. Some critics go so far as to suggest that the most significant subject of utopian writing actually lies in the attempt and ultimate failure to conceive utopia, the essential incapacity to produce a vision that is the complete other to what is. The emphasis is, therefore, more on the process and struggle to imagine, than on the content of what is imagined.

***Your insistence on viewing utopia as a transcendental idea that evolves and shifts according to perspective, allows for an argument on the nature of art and the important process that is set in motion by the integration of art and the intellect. This is a crucially important theme – something that has been lost in most contemporary studies. But I wonder how this then relates to the question of institutional control of serious discourse. As intellectual space has become dominated by the university and university publications, do you think it's become much more difficult to be a 'Constant' or a 'Lefebvre'?***

To address these questions of institutional control and intellectual space, I feel there's a need to situate them within wider processes that involve media networks and cultural production, neoliberalisation and spectacular power. Also important are the oppositional actions of social movements. These seem to me to be fundamental areas to address when considering how utopian projects might – or might not – find wider resonance in the world today, if I've understood your question correctly. Of course universities are part of that and, as someone working within one myself, I think it's vital that there's vigorous debate and critical engagement with the consequences and impacts of their current restructuring, not just in the UK but also around the world. Yet thinking about the wider frame might help clarify certain current threats as well as opportunities. I'm thinking, for example, of how global capital's current dependency on digital technology allied to the changing nature of work for many people, through the development of what some critics term 'immaterial labour' that involves informational and cultural aspects of the commodity, may be leading not only to extensions of control and exploitation but also to new possibilities for appropriation and re-functioning. Much current exploration of these possibilities is collective in orientation, involving not specialist artists in the traditional sense but a more diffuse range of cultural workers and activist artists. In that regard, it's perhaps interesting to recall that, when Constant moved away from COBRA and embarked on his journey towards New Babylon during the 1950s, he asserted the need to go beyond individualized notions of the artist and move towards forms collective construction. It's interesting to speculate what he'd make of current developments were he starting out as an artist today.

***In 1968 a member of our small collective in San Francisco had just returned from Paris***



***clutching a pamphlet from a hitherto unknown organisation called the Situationist International that referred to a planned series of activities slated to happen simultaneously in a number of cities in Europe and America which was to be known as 'Ten Days that Shook the Empire'. It looked good to us as we were tired of trying to write the perfect leaflet that would explain, in yet more visceral terms, why America was in Vietnam and why it shouldn't be there. So, in an enormous burst of energy, we built a cardboard city over the central green of our university campus with signposted paths that took those who entered into what we called 'the game of life' through the logical consequences (or what we thought were the logical consequences) of choosing one route rather than another. The project was a great success and our little group of a dozen momentarily mushroomed into thousands, but when ten days had passed and the empire had been little shaken, we went back to writing occasional leaflets. However, the power of that moment remained with us and some from our ranks later joined with the Mime Troupe and other agitprop groupings to incite the masses by popping up in improbable places and doing skits where the actors merged into everyday life situations – only more so – to squeeze out what we called back then 'the essential contradictions.' Later, having come to live in Europe, I found there was an easy bond between the 'Soixante-huiters' whether they were from New York, Paris, London or Prague. We all had one slogan in common – a single idea that reigned over all the other rhetorical ones – and that was 'All power to the imagination!' That, above all, was the spirit of '68. All things were possible if you could but imagine them.***

In the late 1950s the Situationists, themselves, proposed to construct a labyrinth in the old market area of Les Halles, in central Paris, for 'ludic education'. Partly it was in response to development plans that promised to sweep away the markets, and partly it was meant to give glimpses of other potential uses of space. Your story brings up that question we discussed earlier, about what lives on from fleeting events and interventions. It's often easy to dismiss temporary interventions but, as you say, they can galvanise actions beyond the moment itself and the memory for those who participate or come across the event can remain important.

Particularly interesting to me is the potential power of intervening in spaces, through both temporary interventions and also longer lasting constructions. In that light, from the period you're talking about I'm actually more drawn to the slogan 'Under the paving stones, the beach!' Of course, it has become a cliché of '68 but it brings out, so well, the sense that other worlds are not only possible but also close by – that they're within reach, and that through action and struggle they may be realized. That geographical imagination is invaluable for thinking about cities as fields of possibility, as was shown by many of the actions around '68, and as many contemporary social movements demonstrate through their creative and joyful interventions in streets and public spaces to contest powerful forces and assert rights to the city. Although my book deals with historical materials and certainly doesn't pretend to provide solutions, one of my hopes in exploring aspects of past movements is that it might contribute to stoking utopian spirits today.

