

1-1-1990

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Ralph (1990) "Mythos, Memory, and Utopian Visions," *Oz*: Vol. 12. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2378-5853.1206>

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Mythos, Memory, and Utopian Visions

Ralph Johnson

With each design proposal architects seek to approach a utopian vision, an ideal place. The role memory plays in this activity is determined by the philosophical perspective of the architect. This, in turn, is a product of myth. The word myth is derived from the Greek "mythos" which refers to the sacred and partisan narrative of the memorable origins of the community. It is a prescriptive concept which is intimately linked to memory. It is the relationship between mythos, memory, and utopian visions which will be examined in this paper. To accomplish this, the philosophical foundations of cities proposed in Plato's *Republic*¹ (Circa 380 BC) and Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*² (Circa 1400 AD) will be explored. Both seek to create ideal cities, but in treating memory in radically different ways each reveals a clearly unique mythos. In the case of Plato, a clear relationship to the modern movement is revealed, while in Christine de Pizan's work there exists striking parallels to post modern thought. Employing these precedents, the utopian visions of contemporary architects can be evaluated with regard to their consideration of memory and consequently the mythos they perpetuate.

Plato's *Republic* may generally be described as an investigation of the concepts of wisdom and justice in both the individual and the city. To examine these issues in the individual, Socrates chooses to begin at the large scale, the city, specifically delineating the principles for founding the ideal city. Socrates states that the ci-

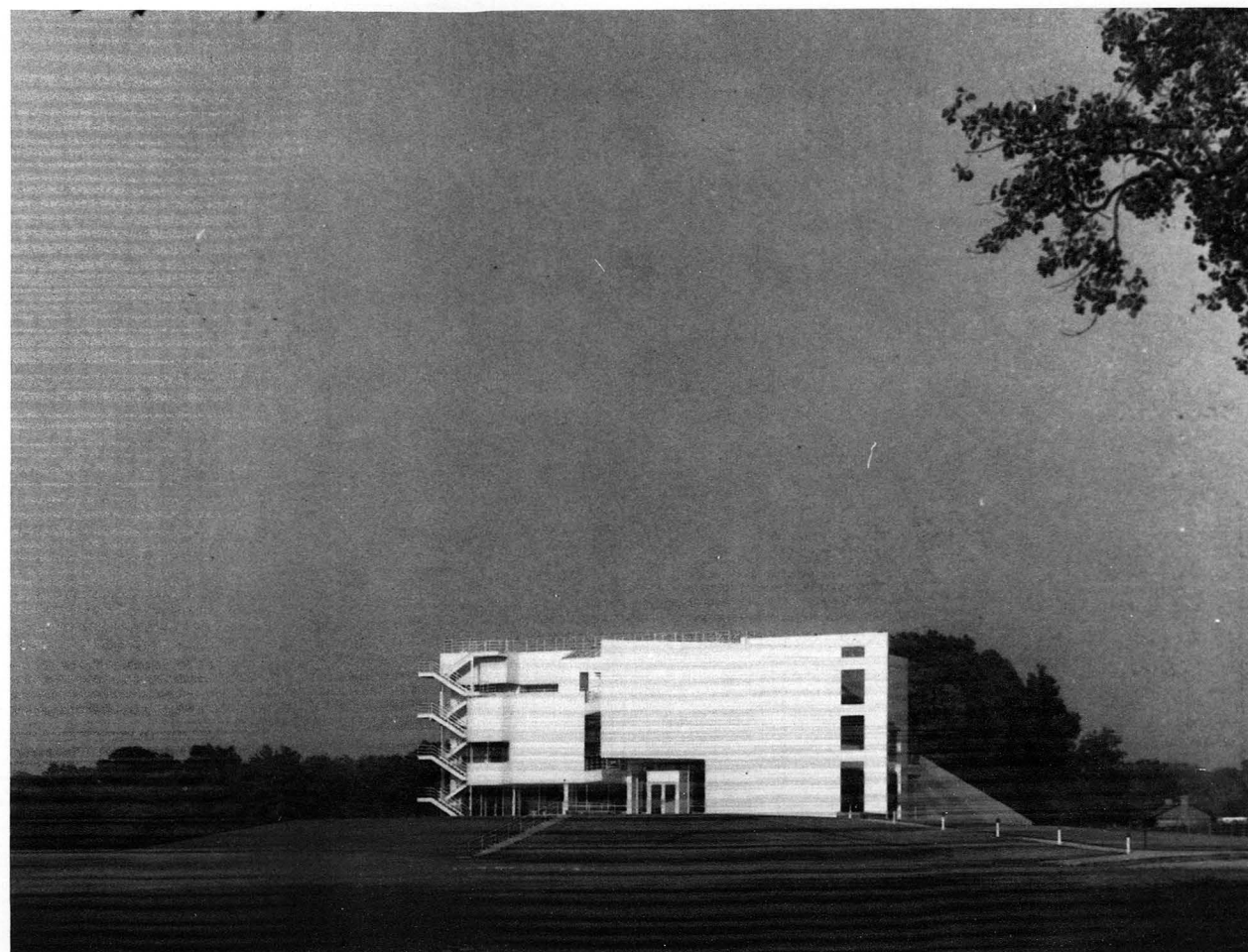


Plate 1: Richard Meier, The Atheneum, New Harmony, Indiana, 1975-1979

ty is founded on only one principle: "I think a city comes to be, I said, because not one of us is self-sufficient, but needs many things."³ There are two aspects of this principle which are significant in creating the mythos of Plato's city. The first is quite straight forward: we are inherently dependent upon one another.

The city, to be most effective, needs subordination of the individual to the group, to the city itself. The second aspect of the emerging mythos is much more subtle and is better revealed by the following:

... each one of us is born somewhat

different from others, one more apt for one task, one for another ... Further, does a man do better if he practices many crafts, or if, being one man, he restricts himself to one craft. When he restricts himself to one⁴

Not only is the individual subordinate to the city, but the city is composed of specialists, experts in specific crafts, whose judgement is not subject to the critique of those outside the craft.

After establishing a profile of the city dweller's nature, he proceeds to develop a concept of wisdom or acquired knowledge. Plato introduces his argument on this subject by explaining the behavior of a dog:

... whenever he (a dog) sees a stranger he is angry, even though no harm has been done to him, but whomsoever he knows he welcomes even if he has never received anything good from him. Have you not wondered at this? ... he judges anything he sees as being friendly or hostile by no other criterion than that he knows the former and does not know the latter.⁵

The human analogy is that we will accept that which we are familiar with and reject that which is unfamiliar to us. Plato thus suggests a censored education:

Shall we carelessly allow the children to hear any kind of stories composed by anybody, and to take into their souls beliefs which are for the most part contrary to those we think they should hold in maturity? We shall not allow that. Then we must first of all, it seems, control the story tellers. Whatever noble story they compose we shall select,

but a bad one we must reject. Then we shall persuade nurses and mothers to tell their children those we have selected and by those stories to fashion their minds far more than they can shape their bodies by handling them. The majority of the stories they now tell must be thrown out ...⁶

This censored education is quite clearly undertaken to start afresh. It is argued that the existing culture, as perpetuated by stories, cannot serve as the basis for the ideal city. Wrong stories will become familiar and thus not rejected. If stories both "friendly" and "hostile" to the ideal city are part of its foundation, Plato sees the city and, consequently, the individual doomed. By a natural association of ideas, Plato extends his argument for censorship to all aspects of the community. The sacred and partisan narrative of the memorable origins of the communities is thus not an extension of experience or the collective memory but an idealized hypothesis of what the community is to be. Its origin and its reality are intended to, in fact, be one and the same. The city and, to adopt Plato's reductive technique, its architecture must be without precedent. The architecture serving as monuments to discreet entities, inter-related only because they cannot survive alone, is the antithesis of urbanity. This is a mythos founded not on the memories of a community but on the explicit rejection of memory.

There are numerous examples of contem-

porary cities and architecture founded on these Platonic principles. Cities such as Chandigar, Brazilia, Runcorn, New Town, and even Reston, Virginia, come to mind. Architectural examples such as Richard Meier's Atheneum (Plate 1), Piano and Rogers' Centre Pompidou, and Norman Foster's Hong Kong Bank abound. These places are extraordinary in both their beauty and purity. They achieve the Platonic ideal but not without a loss. The loss is in their inability to draw empathetically upon our memory. They have been purified and thus successfully represented a utopian vision founded on a mythos severed from memory. This is perhaps a contradiction in terms. Without the former can the latter even exist? Only time will reveal the success of this Platonic method. If following generations find these places imbued with the collective memory sought by Plato, then in fact the mythos he sought will also have emerged.

The City of Ladies unequivocally focuses upon the inequality suffered by women, its roots and a philosophical model for overcoming gender prejudices. Christine de Pizan, just as Plato, chose the allegory of building a utopian city to demonstrate this philosophical model. Further paralleling Plato, the concepts of wisdom and justice form the basis for her investigation. These she introduces as the goddesses of Rectitude (wisdom) and Justice, preceded most significantly by a third — Reason. They are inextricably linked to one another:

... and of the three noble ladies

whom you see here we are as one and the same, we could not exist without one another; and what the first (Reason) disposes, the second (Rectitude) orders and initiates and I, the third (Justice), finishes and terminates it.⁷

The goddess Reason is doubly significant, first for the concepts she represents and secondly because of her role in forming de Pizan's utopian vision. Reason represents both the past and the present; thus, she is "one who has insight into everything." She carries the mirror of clear self-knowledge and

... thanks to this mirror, the essences, qualities, properties, and measures of all things are known, nor can anything be done well without it.⁸

In her mirror the present as derived from our past is seen, a past experienced both physically and metaphysically. Reason's role in constructing the city is to aid de Pizan in creating the foundation and walls around the community. Fortified by Reason and upon her foundations, the ideal city may rise. Why did de Pizan place so much emphasis on the concept of reason? Perhaps this is best understood in terms of the quandary de Pizan faced with regard to the "evidence" against women, for she finds virtually all scholarly work condemns them:

... although my intellect did not perceive my own great faults and,

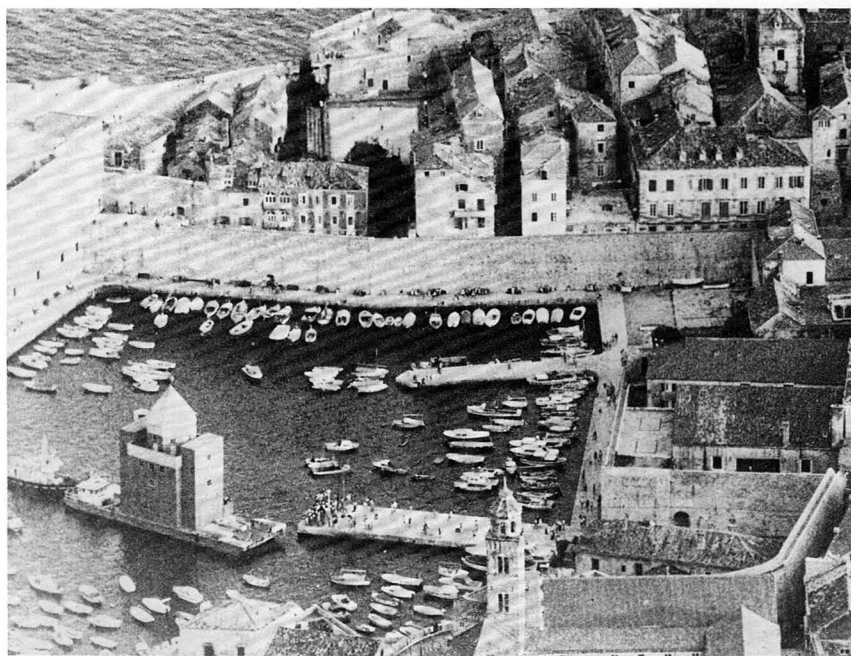


Plate 2: Aldo Rossi, Teatro del Mondo, Venice Biennial, Venice, 1979

likewise, those of other women because of its simpleness and ignorance, it was however truly fitting that such was the case. And so I relied more on the judgment of others than on what I myself felt and knew.⁹

De Pizan's experience and intuition leads her to doubt the scholars, but it was Reason's alternative interpretations of the scholars' evidence which provided her with the needed proof to believe in herself. Reason looked at the past and interpreted events in a manner consistent with de Pizan's self-knowledge. Censorship of these stories is not needed nor even desired, because they form the perspec-

tive from which utopian visions can be seen and against which they will be judged. To emphasize the importance of this concept, de Pizan selects an "infamous" woman to build the city's foundation:

It is quite true that many people reproach her — and if she lived under our law, rightfully so — because she took as a husband a son she had had with Ninus her lord. ... But this lady did nothing to excuse herself for this great mistake because at this time ... people lived according to the law of nature ... for there can be no doubt that if she thought this evil

or that she would incur the slightest reproach, she would never have done this, since she had such a great and noble heart and so deeply loved Honor. And now the first stone is set in the foundation of our city.¹⁰

The first stone, the foundation for the entire enterprise is represented by incest! She could have chosen no story less virtuous yet her analysis is reasonable and does not rely on excuses, exclusions, forgiveness, or pity. We are presented with our heritage, and it is from this precedent that the sacred and partisan narrative of the memorable origins of the community spring. Mythos is thus founded on physical evidence and de Pizan's metaphysical self-knowledge. It is important to note that this does not imply that the foundation is based directly on history or a collective memory, but springs from the reasoned memories and experiences of one person. Herein lies the direct connection to post modern thought. Mythos is founded on experience, on memory, on what an individual feels and knows. This experience or memory is based on physical evidence but must be interpreted individually through reason and against mythos. Together, they form the basis from which a utopian vision can emerge. For example, Cooper-Eckstut's urban design for Battery Park is based on extending the old street grid of lower Manhattan into a barren site and developing a "traditional" esplanade for which there were local precedents. Both elements existed and could easily have been

interpreted as less than virtuous, but Cooper-Eckstut saw in these elements the mythos from which a utopian vision might spring. To walk the streets or esplanade today confirms their conviction, for it feels like a part of lower Manhattan. It is unquestionably new and different, yet it carries forward a familiar and admirable heritage. Other urban examples such as Charles Moore's Kresge College at Santa Cruz, California, Andres Duany's Seaside; Walton County, Florida; and of course, the work of Leon Krier exemplify this attitude. We see de Pizan's thought equally well expressed in architectural projects such as Sterling's Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, West Germany; Faye Jones' Thorncrown Chapel; and Aldo Rossi's Teatro del Mondo for the Venice Biennale (Plate 2). All of these works have in common a singularly personal interpretation of the past serving as the foundation for the artist's utopian vision. As a visitor, one senses the mythos and thus shares in both the memories of the artist and their utopian vision.

Is either of these philosophical positions more likely to be significant than the other? Our generation certainly cannot judge the vast majority of work represented by the Platonists because we carry far too many "hostile" images, but we do have older examples such as the Eiffel Tower. It was a utopian vision conceived in defiance of memory and now possesses such a powerful mythos that it controls the skyline of Paris. With regard to a de Pizanist ideology, will generations that follow be stimulated by the connections

we feel between our memories and visions of utopia, or will these solutions merely appear to be manneristic and void of intrinsic value? Obviously, both techniques are capable of producing extraordinary places or places inappropriate to human occupation. In an era such as ours when old philosophies are being rapidly displaced by new ones, it is important to critique both with rigor.

A third phenomena has arisen, however, and must be considered, for our experience now includes the images of our recent Platonist past. Can this serve as the mythos for a new vision of utopia? We can experience this phenomena in Bernard Tschumi's Parc De La Villette in Paris (Plate 3), Morphosis' Kate Mantilini Restaurant in Santa Monica, or through the extraordinary drawings of Zaha Hadid's Kurfürstendamm 70 Berlin project. Do we perceive mythos or something else? Jean Baudrillard¹¹ argues the latter, for these works rely not on a reflection of a basic reality but are reflections of a censored reality divested of its origins: they are twice removed simulations. Nostalgia replaces mythos, for referentials alone remain. These are neither memorable nor experiential, thus Reason has no resources, no memory, with which to form mythos. This is not said to condemn the work but merely to place it firmly in the mainstream of our culture. The distinction between the real and hyperreal is lost in air conditioning, television documentaries, "The Days of Our Lives," and Disneyland. Architecture, by its very artificial nature reflects our culture and to-

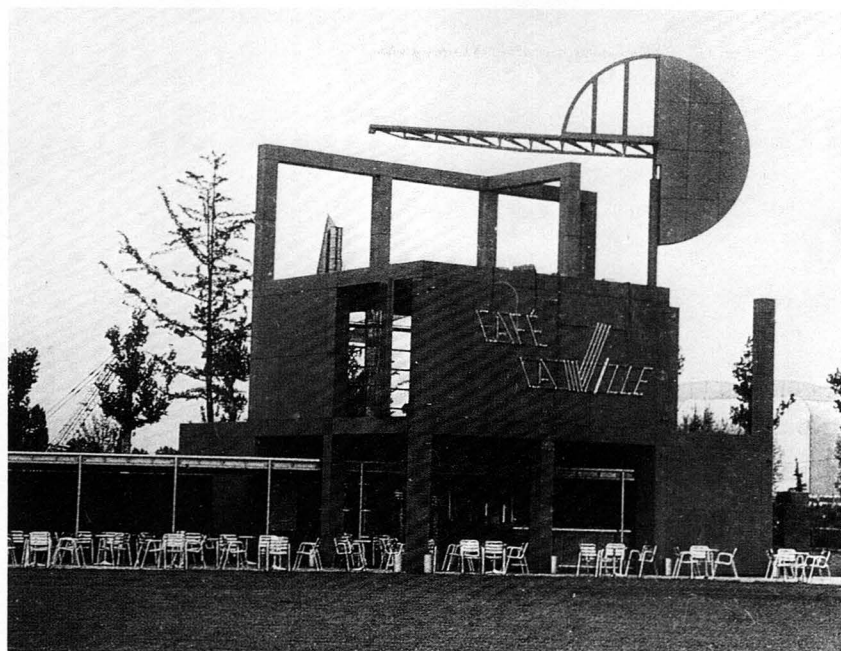


Plate 3: Bernard Tschumi, Parc de La Villette, Paris, 1983-

day, perhaps by the revered hands of Plato, mythos has been for the most part, lost. Nostalgia dominates. If memory, mythos, and utopian visions are interconnected, then both memory and utopian visions have vanished also.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Plato's Republic* translated by G.M.A. Grube. Hackett Publishing Company, 1986.
2. de Pizan, Christine, *The Book of the City of Ladies* translated by Earl Jeffrey Richards. Persea Books, 1987.
3. *Plato's Republic Book II* translated by G.M.A. Grube. Hackett Publishing Company, 1986. p. 39.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
7. de Pizan, Christine, *The Book of the City of Ladies* translated by Earl Jeffrey Richards. Persea Books, 1987. p. 14.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
11. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation* translated by Paul Foss, Paul Patton & Philip Beitchman. pp. 1-79.