

# THE UTOPIAN MOMENT, NOW?

by  
Barry Vacker

Text to accompany the exhibit:

“Before and After Utopia: Images of Urban Abandonment, Absence,  
and Aspiration”

Curated by Olivia Antsis

Photographers:

Matthew Murray, “Abandoned America”

Michael Christopher Brown, Ordos

Joshua Lieberman, Arcosanti

Michael Meysarosh, Masdar

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Open Lens Gallery

The Gershman Y

401 South Broad Street

Philadelphia, PA 19147

*Since we and the past cannot surmount the current of time and would little rejoice in the notion of cyclical returns, we can only toil at "building the future." — Paolo Soleri*

*We have to be in these two orders of reality: we have to confront what we've lost and anticipate what's ahead of us: that's our brand of fatality. — Jean Baudrillard*

## 1. WHY THESE SITES AND IMAGES?

The curator of "Before and After Utopia," Olivia Anstis, has asked us to contemplate the photos of four architectural and urban sites, carefully selected from around the world. Why? Really, why should we contemplate the buildings and structures in these photographs? After all, we can look up these sites on the internet and read their descriptions. And, given that this is a small photography exhibit, why the grand title: "Before and After Utopia"?

Arcosanti, Masdar, Ordos, and Abandoned America are four sites and four models, offering four pasts and four futures. Born north of Phoenix in 1970, Arcosanti is the city of "arcology," Paolo Soleri's profound and common sense idea of merging architecture and ecology in building our cities, an idea almost utterly ignored in the subsequent four decades of energy and ecological hubris in America. An urban project in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, Masdar is promoted as the "zero carbon" and "zero waste" city, a prototype for an ecologically sensible future. One of the many giant building projects in China, Ordos is a new city built for the 21<sup>st</sup> century civilization that China is becoming, though the city lies almost completely empty, a ghost town for globalization. With images from sites across the country, "Abandoned America" reveals the cultural entropy of an America becoming lost to neglect, cultural decay, and changing aspirations.

The photographs of Arcosanti (Joshua Lieberman), Masdar (Michael Meysarosh), Ordos (Michael Christopher Brown), and Abandoned America (Matthew Christopher Murray) are poetic, striking, or haunting, revealing the eyes of artists and photojournalists. That much seems obvious. But, each photographer has captured and crafted images that offer insights and perspectives for viewing some of our deepest current cultural conditions. What makes this small photography exhibit worthy of a grand title — "Before and After Utopia" — is the juxtaposing combination of utopian and dystopian ideas in the images of all four photographers.

In the selection of these four sites and images, Anstis suggests the challenges and solutions facing the global metropolises are not merely political, technological, or ecological — they are also existential and philosophical. That's why this brief essay is not another lecture on historical preservation, ecological sustainability, urban planning, or "the future of the city." Anstis provides us with a poetic and perceptive eye, peering into these striking and haunting images to sense the deeper meanings latent in the surfaces, meanings which are all saying something about "now." The "now" is the present moment for our cities, our culture, our planet, the moment between past and future, the moment before and after utopia. The existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre explained that humans always face an existential moment, the "now" when we must project ourselves into the future, to imagine a *mode of being* for human living. In our globalized and mechanized metropolises, we face that existential moment — the technological, ecological, and cosmological now.

And, where do we find models for new modes of being? It is in the realm of utopian theory and utopian models for making a better world — not necessarily a perfect world, but at least a *better* world. By selecting images of Arcosanti, Masdar, Ordos, and Abandoned

America, Antsis points our eyes toward key utopian and dystopian themes in the built environments we inhabit, now and in the foreseeable future. In the exhibit are the fears of an abandoned America and empty globalization in Ordos and the hopes and aspirations in the utopian models of Arcosanti and Masdar. We can gaze upon these images, but the full meaning and significance of these sites cannot be understood in a vacuum, for they should be situated in their cultural and historical contexts. Though such a task would require at least a small book, this brief essay will sketch the contours and contexts for these sites in hopes of providing a deeper appreciation of the images in “Before and After Utopia” and hopefully stimulate your thinking long after you have left the exhibit.

## 2. THE ROLE OF UTOPIAN MODELS

Is it still possible to think of “utopia” in reference to our urban metropolises? Most would scoff: “No, it is impossible!”

Yet, if we seem destined to a dystopian future of unsustainable living amidst global warming and terror wars, and we are without any new “utopias,” then what is going to motivate humans to remodel their cities and refresh their minds to live and think more in harmony with nature and the cosmos? The fact is: humans need utopias. More specifically, we need new utopian *models* for living on Earth, models that are sane and sustainable, especially in relation to population expansion, migrations to metropolises, and to the ecology and biosphere of our planetary home floating alone in the vast expanding universe. These needs are central to the cosmic and utopian ambitions of Arcosanti.

Utopian theory has long provided “grand narratives” for humanity and society, spanning the millennia in providing models for a better world or an “ideal society.”<sup>1</sup> It is common to think of “utopia” as referring to an impossible perfection tainted by a flawed humanity, a totalitarian regime to which we all must conform, or a place that is unreal and utterly imaginary. After all, the word “utopia” originally meant “no place.” In the realm of political or religious utopias, the goal may indeed be some kind unrealistic norm or unverifiable faith to which all people and all reality must conform, which is why political and religious utopias so often end up being totalitarian.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the everyday impact of other kinds of utopian theory is more nuanced and complex, especially in the models drawn from technology, architecture, and urban planning, where the goal is not necessarily a perfect world, but a *better* world.<sup>3</sup>

Across history and geography, utopian models have guided the trajectories and destinies of humanity and society, while shaping the actual forms and functions of daily life. Can we deny the reordering of daily life under industrial and information technologies over the past two centuries? These technologies were celebrated in numerous utopian models displayed in world’s fairs from 1851 through 2010. For example, the 1851 Great Exhibition in London celebrated the rise of industrialization, the 1939 New York World’s Fair celebrated the industrial and technological “world of tomorrow,” the 1964 New York World’s Fair celebrated the “information age” and the “space age,” Expo 67 in Montreal and Expo 70 in Osaka both celebrated the role of science and technology in reordering our world and our place in the cosmos, and Expo 74 in Spokane introduced ecology and the environment to the utopian equation.<sup>4</sup> By and large, humans have built the worlds featured in these fairs, and these are but a few of the sites and places where utopian models have been presented to society. Obviously, the details vary widely, but the essential utopian models have been

embraced and constructed — for better and/or worse — to create the industrialized, mechanized, electrified, urbanized, suburbanized, mediated, Disneyfied, and globalized world we inhabit.

The existential assumption of any utopian model is that if the material or intellectual world can be improved around humans, then life could be improved for humans, life in its actuality and spirituality. It is this endless quest for a “better” world that fuels the embrace of utopian models and most new technologies. Of course, virtually all utopian models have had their unintended and unexpected consequences, which have produced dystopian effects, especially when mixed with the hubris, greed, short-sightedness, and sheer folly of humanity’s wars, tribalism, and mindless consumption. So naturally we have a long history of dystopian models (shown in numerous sci-fi films and apocalyptic news stories) warning us of a world made not better, but worse, often much worse. In fact, our culture is filled with dystopian and apocalyptic models that dominate our thinking about the collective future.

Thus, what surrounds us in our cities is what came “after utopia,” and what we face now is the moment “before utopia,” the moment when we must imagine better models for the future metropolis and planet. And that moment is the goal of this exhibit and the models presented in Arcosanti and Masdar.

The quest for utopian models reaches back to Plato’s Atlantis, the myth from before the first millennium which has exerted a profound and lasting cultural influence well into the third millennium. Just as Socrates sought a model for an ideal society, so, too, do we today in places like Arcosanti and Masdar. In the myth of Atlantis we can see the existential origins of many utopian and dystopian models in our culture, including Arcosanti, Masdar, Ordos, and Abandoned America.

### 3. PLATO’S ATLANTIS

Plato’s Atlantis was a mythical island-utopia, the first utopian model in Western culture, the first utopia to disappear in an apocalypse and the first science-fiction utopia to project a technological future where humans lived with nature by conquering nature. Born in the dialogues of *Timaeus* and *Critias*, Atlantis was described by Plato with such poetic detail that it seemed like a civilization that surely could have existed.<sup>5</sup> The story was told by Critias in response to Socrates’ question about whether an ideal society had ever existed.

Once upon a time, 9,000 years ago, Atlantis existed as a great civilization situated on a magnificent island, somewhere in the oceans beyond the known world. Three sides of the island contained cliffs and mountains, while one side was open to the seas. Between the mountains was a fertile agricultural area irrigated with a grid of canals and channels, which carried river water flowing from the mountains. The island was also populated by many kinds of animals, along with exotic plants and fruits. There was an abundant supply of precious metals and food, so much that the Atlanteans material wants were filled in this paradise on Earth.

The capitol of Atlantis was situated on the open side of the island and was structured as a series of concentric circles — alternate rings of land and water. Connected by bridges, the rings of land contained places to appreciate art and nature, gardens and fountains, and places for exercise and contemplation. At the center of the city was the palace of the gods, surrounded by walls of gold and statuary. Ruling over Atlantis was a benevolent royalty, and the island utopia was protected by a powerful military. Despite the wealth and luxury, the

Atlanteans were not intoxicated by the abundance and dedicated themselves to pursuing knowledge and living in harmony.

Eventually, however, hubris and power-lust emerged on the island civilization, and the Atlanteans sought to impose their model on Athens. However, Athens dealt the Atlanteans a crushing military defeat, ending the civilization that went from utopia to dystopia. The cosmic forces turned against Atlantis, for it was soon destroyed in an apocalypse of earthquakes and hurricanes, causing the island utopia to disappear, forever lost beneath the ocean. In the Atlantis myth, one can easily see a warning for contemporary America, dedicated to imposing its way of life on others, squandering its wealth in endless wars at home and abroad, exploiting its natural resources to the detriment of the environment, and living super-sized lifestyles funded by unsustainable personal and government debt. But, the influence of Atlantis runs deeper as it spans the millennia.

#### 4. LIVING AMIDST LOST WORLDS AND NEW WORLDS

Created long before the “great fall” was appropriated by sacred texts, Atlantis was the first utopia where nature, technology, and civilization existed in harmony, all of which was destroyed and disappeared in an apocalypse triggered by greed, hubris, and natural forces. Atlantis provided a utopian agricultural model, where farming and irrigation amplified the bounty of nature. Atlantis was the first model of the urban plan, where the city is ordered through geometric forms. Circles, spheres, and grids dominated virtually all subsequent utopian models, up through the twentieth century, from Le Corbusier and the modern metropolis to Walt Disney and the postmodern theme park. Perhaps most important, Atlantis originated two key utopian concepts that have spanned the millennia — the “new world” and the “lost world.” It is these two concepts that inform the trajectories of the global metropolises, ecological utopianism, and connect the meanings of Arcosanti, Masdar, Ordos, and Abandoned America.

Atlantis was the first model of a utopian “new world,” a human-created world that overcame the constraints of pure nature through the deployment of technology. In other words, Atlantis was the first example of the machine that transformed the garden. Since Atlantis deployed technology and planning, it was the genetic origin for the succession of rationalized utopian models, all oriented toward the future and building a “new world” — the march of science, technology, civilization, consumer paradise, land of progress, metropolis, global village, information age, global brain, network society, and so on.

Since Atlantis was destroyed in an apocalypse, it was also the first model of a “lost world,” a world or civilization that was destroyed or disappeared. Atlantis is the genetic origin for an endless variety of nostalgic utopian models, all looking toward the past and the preservation of a “lost world” — the return to nature, ecology, wilderness, garden paradise, promised land, small towns, local village, golden age, Gaia hypothesis, and so on. Obviously, many of these lost and new world models *overlap* and embrace others at the same time. The following table illustrates this complex duality, the tensions between past and future and the many utopian models born of yearnings for yesterday or the tomorrow to come:

TIME:	“THE PAST”	“THE FUTURE”
	• yesterday was better	• tomorrow will be better

- premodern, anti-modern
- modern, postmodern (which can also incorporate features of the premodern)

MODEL:	<b>THE LOST WORLD</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• return to nature</li> <li>• ecology</li> <li>• wilderness</li> <li>• garden paradise</li> <li>• promised land</li> <li>• small town</li> <li>• local village</li> <li>• golden age</li> <li>• Gaia hypothesis</li> <li>• or any world “lost” to evolution or entropy.</li> </ul>	<b>THE NEW WORLD</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• march of science</li> <li>• technology</li> <li>• civilization</li> <li>• consumer paradise</li> <li>• land of progress</li> <li>• metropolis</li> <li>• global village</li> <li>• space age, atomic age, information age</li> <li>• global brain, the network society (internet)</li> <li>• or any world that is “new” or innovative.</li> </ul>
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| EXHIBIT: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abandoned America</li> <li>• Arcosanti is a hybrid of both lost and new.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Masdar, Ordos</li> </ul> |
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Proponents of either utopian model (lost world or new world) believe that their vision will enable humanity to live more peacefully and harmoniously, with nature and/or with each other.

Proponents of “lost world” utopias view the current cultural and/or natural worlds as degenerating toward doom and destruction, and thus assert that we need to preserve a world being lost, a world that existed in a more perfect yesterday. Proponents of “new world” utopias also view the cultural world as entropic or chaotic, but assert that we can technologically improve this world, a world that will exist in a better tomorrow. Proponents of new world utopias often view the lost world utopias as simplistic and sentimental, antiquated and outdated. The utopians of past and future both fear the great fall, the apocalyptic demise, where degeneration eventually leads to destruction, and this is no less true more than a decade into the new millennium. In the end, Atlantis poses the great paradox for humanity — we possess the power to improve the world or destroy it. We can ascend the heights to create a new world, or come crashing down to effect a lost world.

Utopian (and dystopian) theory is most always about reordering the space-time parameters of the present, based on the cumulative events of the past and possibilities existing in the future. Thus, utopian theory steers us in either of two directions — humans are either retreating toward the past or marching into the future.

The global metropolises we inhabit are an urban universe that evolved from the dominant utopian models of the twentieth century — the construction of a new world, a land of progress where the march of science effected a technological and consumer paradise, manifested in the skyscraper and suburban metropolises powered by fossil fuels and the nuclear energy of the atomic age. Accompanying these utopian models were the modern humanist imperatives to move societies from craft to mechanization, scarcity to abundance, poverty to wealth, inequality to equality, ignorance to enlightenment, and so on. Obviously, the results have been uneven, with humans far too often merely exploiting and ignoring nature in their dedication to filling their lives with material goods and more entertainment

than enlightenment, more narcissism than knowledge, more myth than science.

It is important to keep in mind that the “new world” can become a lost world, through war or neglect. In fact, the great fear of the Cold War was that modern new world would be destroyed in an atomic war. There is also the possibility of hybrids between new and lost world models, where technology is used to retrieve ecology in hopes of restoring a better balance between culture and nature. At the strangest level, there are the postmodern hybrids known as theme parks, where lost worlds (or past worlds) are often *simulated* as new worlds in mediated, movie set architecture. Disney World and Las Vegas feature these models and architectural and urban strategies, which seek to simulate the past in a permanent now, like a movie playing on an endless loop, with a theme and plot that never changes.

These utopian and dystopian themes run throughout our intellectual and popular culture. The classic film, *Metropolis* (1926), depicts the “new world” utopia of the skyscraper city and the electrified, mechanized metropolis. The utopian city almost becomes a “lost world,” effected by the inhumane management of the machines and the workers who operate them. Many critics mistakenly think the film is anti-technology, when its explicit utopian message is to make the machines more humane so humans can build their new world metropolis. Since the release of the film, humans have been busy building their own electrified, mechanized, skyscraper metropolises, with highways slicing in through them and planes flying above, as depicted in the film.

The lost world/new world themes of Atlantis and *Metropolis* have been appropriated and extended many times, notably in *Blade Runner* (1982), *Fight Club* (1999), and *The Matrix* (1999). In *Blade Runner*, much of the “new world” metropolis is entropic and degenerating, seemingly destined to become a dystopian lost world. Meanwhile, the real world is being overtaken by its reproductions, personified by “the replicants” (robots), who are faster, stronger, and perhaps sexier than the humans who created them. Offering end of the millennium apocalyptic scenarios, *Fight Club* and *The Matrix* both celebrate returns to anti-modern “lost world” utopias that have been destroyed by the modern utopias, which turned dystopian, entropic, and apocalyptic. For Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*, the desired utopian model is a return to a premodern hunter-gatherer society that would emerge after the destruction of civilization, the metropolis, and all its “new world” technologies. For Morpheus and Neo in *The Matrix*, the utopian goal was to return to “Zion,” a less mediated, less simulated world where people were supposedly more real, more authentic, more communal. *The Matrix* updates *Metropolis* for the information age, transforming the apocalyptic demise into a war between humans and their computer-powered machines; the factories and assembly line workers of *Metropolis* were replaced by computers and people plugged into media networks and living in a simulated reality.<sup>6</sup>

## 5. THE NEED FOR NEW UTOPIAN MODELS?

Of course, all this discussion may seem to beg the question, something Socrates often revealed in many of Plato’s dialogues. Sites like Abandoned America and Arcosanti may emerge from certain cultural contexts and dystopian conditions, but do we really need new utopian models on a wide-scale for society in the new millennium? After all, we have the internet, we are more “connected” through social media, and we are told our technologies are getting more “intelligent” and we are living on a “smarter planet.” If this notion were inherently true, one might expect that many people visiting or reading about this exhibit

would have already known about Arcosanti, Masdar, and Ordos, though I would bet that 99.9% of Americans and Philadelphians have never heard of any of these three cities.

The September 2011 cover story in *Scientific American* exclaimed that our cities are getting “Better ... greener ... smarter.” While the articles described many interesting trends about urban growth and the green evolution slowly emerging in the metropolises, the articles seem naïve or oblivious to the deeper existential or philosophical conditions. This perspective was reflected in the lead article, “The Social Nexus,” which claimed that “the best way to harness a city’s potential for creativity and innovation is to jack people into the network and get out of the way.”<sup>7</sup> This brand of “information age” and internet utopianism — also known as the “hive mind” and “smart mob” — seems rather naïve in its view toward the internet and the potential usage of “intelligent” technologies for enlightenment and ecological purposes. This view should not be surprising because the commercial propaganda of product advertising is filled with utopian depictions of the internet and the latest media technologies, which repeatedly are shown to make us smarter, happier, and enjoying better lives, while building a better, smarter planet. Apple and IBM, two of America’s most prestigious companies, lead the way in providing these utopian models.

As illustrated in the *Scientific American* article, the most utopian “information age” assessment of the internet and the proliferating screens is that they represent technologies through which humans gain more information and knowledge of the external reality beyond the screens. With exponentially increasing power and declining costs, ever more powerful computers are permeating society. Indeed, we are living amidst an explosion of information and knowledge in virtually every field of intellectual endeavor, especially in the many disciplines of science.<sup>8</sup> And, all this information is being made widely available in cyberspace via the internet — the global network glowing on billions of electronic screens. Perhaps this utopian possibility is best symbolized by Wikipedia, which, however imperfect, surely seeks to make a better world by increasing enlightenment.

Since, Americans spend on average 8-12 hours gazing at screens each day, surely they must be getting smarter and wiser with access to all the information and knowledge. Of course, such increasing enlightenment is possible, and it is happening for some people and organizations. But, the effect of media technologies are never that simple because they are not neutral in their effect on consciousness.<sup>9</sup> There are always unintended consequences.

For most everyone, the screens are far less about exploring and gaining essential new perspectives on reality than they are about reflecting their views back to themselves as “reality” or conforming their consciousnesses to the rules and “reality” of the screen. Let’s face it, no one goes online to have their essential worldview transformed; more likely, the internet provides incremental facts and additions to what they already know or think they know.

It’s hard to be immune to these seductive technological powers. Since the advent of television, the screen has become the new “reality,” supplanting the book as the center of the representation of history, knowledge, theory, and understanding. As Jean Baudrillard explained, the screen is part of the utopian new world of “hyperreality,” a mediated reality that is more real than real, more true than true, more beautiful than beautiful. If we think of the screens as “maps” for exploring and navigating the territories of our lives, and most everyone spends 8-12 hours in front of the screens, then the only conclusion is that the media maps are overtaking and supplanting the territories they are supposed to represent.<sup>10</sup> The screens (maps) are the new hyperrealities (territories). That’s why most everyone is busily

and happily conforming their consciousnesses and their realities to the “reality” of the screens. Enter sites like Twitter and Facebook, which place users at the center of the media universe, the only universe that really matters. Again, it is a challenge for anyone to remain immune to these powers, perhaps impossible.

The sprawling electrified metropolises and the glowing electronic screens have pushed nature and the cosmos to the margins of culture and consciousness, though that is surely not the intended effect. Therefore, it is naïve to believe that “jacking into the network” is the inherent solution for ecology or anything else.

If one turns to the universe of television news, programming, and advertising in America, one cannot find a coherent or meaningful cultural narrative other than a patchwork world of personal utopias amidst celebrity lifestyles and global apocalypses. The news presents us with a never ending narrative of catastrophes — industrial, ecological, and cultural — while celebrating the latest benefits of technological gizmos. Regarding the recent Hurricane Irene (a tropical storm upon arrival in Philadelphia and most of the East Coast), *The Philadelphia Inquirer* blared in a giant font on the front page: “We’re in the Crosshairs.” An MSNBC headline declared the East Coast was in the “crosshairs.” None of these stories are unusual or surprising, for the 24/7 weather maps have clearly overtaken the territories they are supposed to represent. With its nonstop depiction of almost every weather phenomena as a dire threat to humans and commuters, the Weather Channel should be more accurately named the Atmospheric Apocalypse Channel.

The apocalyptic dystopian perspective runs throughout the documentary programming on television. The History Channel, Science Channel, and National Geographic Channel provide endless programming about possible mass extinctions and the end of the world, in forms such as: tsunamis, earthquakes, Mayan prophecies, ecological disasters, “hyper” hurricanes leveling many cities at once, “super” volcanoes burying continents under lava, comets and asteroids smashing Earth, and supernovas scorching Earth. And “dark energy” may eventually rip apart every atom in the entire universe! The list is virtually endless, and let’s not forget all the theological programming which promises Revelations, followed by eternal damnation or salvation. Is it any wonder that people turn to NFL football and Facebook to find a sense of meaning and destiny for their cities and lives?

Yet, mixed between the end of the world is the utopian new world promised by advertising and corporations, a nonstop celebrity-consumer-communication utopia, where every product promises hedonistic pleasure, where people will buy, drive, wear, eat, link, connect, chat, text, and gaze upon themselves smiling on their screens in the glow of micro-fame. And, there are all those medicine commercials, promising cures for all the deadly diseases discovered by medical technologies, thus permitting private death and personal apocalypse to be postponed in pursuit of all the utopian lifestyles in the other advertisements.

The theme of utopia and apocalypse runs through much of contemporary cultural theory, from left to right and beyond, from Slavov Zizek to Al Gore to the Unabomber to Sarah Palin and the Tea Party. If we are to believe our most popular theorists and talking heads, the new world is on the verge of becoming a lost world. If the new world lies in the new millennium, then we have yet to enter it, hardly able to imagine anything beyond its demise. This condition suggests new utopian models are needed.

## 6. BEFORE AND AFTER UTOPIA

Olivia Antsis has produced a timely and provocative exhibit, with these four photographers offering subtly different aesthetic and philosophical perspectives than those that dominate our contemporary culture and media environments. The images and sites pose questions for our future in the metropolis and as a global civilization in the new century and millennium. It is the Atlantis-like cultural conditions that are intuited by Antsis in the sites, images, and title: "Before and After Utopia."

We are now more than a decade beyond the year 2000, the year that was supposed to signal the arrival of "the future," a world of tomorrow filled with utopian possibilities for art, science, culture, and human potential. But, have we — as Americans and as a species — entered the millennium? The calendar says 2011, but, really, think about it, have we entered the future beyond 2000? Of course, science and technology (and some architecture) are accelerating into tomorrow, but what about our philosophies and ideologies? Are we getting smarter and saner?

The Cold War was a struggle for global supremacy between two political/economic utopian models — socialist communism of the Soviet Union versus democratic capitalism of the West. Humans survived the Cold War, but have gone backwards with the Terror War, which is the kind of religious war that modernity was supposed to render obsolete with its technological and consumer paradises and a mass media geared toward spreading enlightenment amongst the citizenry. We may be living *after* the failed utopia-dystopia of communism, but what are the "utopias" that lies *before* us? Are they from the future or the past? Or are they yet more dystopias?

In the electrified and mechanized metropolises, the skyscrapers were modeled as vertical cities of steel and glass stretching toward the starry skies, the highways as automotive individualism, the suburbs as small towns situated between nature and the industrial center, the malls as suburban marketplaces. Of course, far too much of this lifestyle became predicated on unlimited energy and endless resources. Most new skyscrapers were banal, suburbs evolved into sprawl, highways connected malls with shoppers in super-sized SUVs, and the once-utopian models combined with humanity to produce dystopian effects for the global metropolises: energy crises, infrastructure decay, mindless consumption, ecological devastation, global warming, and so on. Yet, billions of people are still migrating to the metropolises.

Given the migration patterns, rates of technological growth, and the rise of environmentalism, the goal of sustaining and improving the surrounding urban and ecological worlds should be part of the equation for any sane utopian model. If Al Gore and others are correct, the "inconvenient truth" is that the modern metropolis may become a premodern Atlantis, a lost world with coastal cities standing amidst rising sea levels and the other cities depleting the planet's fossil fuel energy resources.

*Masdar: the Zero Carbon and Zero Waste Utopian Model*

Masdar is largely a "new world" model that hopes to use new and improved technology to better the ecology of the planet, while still providing the human inhabitants of the city with the benefits of the metropolis, all linked to the global village, the network society. In Masdar, there is no need for atomic age technologies, replaced by "ecological age" energy

sources. Masdar is what comes “before utopia,” the emergence of a sustainable civilization via new technologies, based in alternative energies (especially wind and solar) and the real time monitoring of energy usages and efficiencies in a city wide computer/energy network.

Headed by the Abu Dhabi Future Energy Company and designed by Foster + Partners (founded by Norman Foster), the plan calls for Masdar to be laid out within a large square, encompassing six square kilometers. The current estimated cost for Masdar is approximately US\$20 billion. Let’s hope the giant square plan is not a symbol of future rigidity. With a “total plan” for the city, Masdar represents a top-down model that will likely require numerous adjustments as the technologies improve and citizens modify and customize their living spaces. Generally, bottom up approaches work best, especially when integrated with an overall model that is freely embraced. According to Michael Meysarosh, only a small section of Masdar has been completed and the Personal Rapid Transit system has been cancelled. It remains to be seen if the “zero carbon” and “zero waste” model will be attained or become diluted, trivialized, or merely simulated.

### *Ordos: Ghost Town of Globalization or Utopian Hybrid for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?*

In contrast to American entropy, China represents not only a nation, but a vast and complex civilization on the rise, moving toward a higher or larger order. That trajectory is why Ordos mostly expresses a “new world” model, a hybrid between monumental modern and postmodern architecture and a sprawl of suburban simulacra, copies of other suburban models and architectures from America, which were copies of architectures from Europe and other parts of the world. In Ordos, we see original postmodern architecture situated amidst residential copies of copies of copies, a strange hybrid of Frank Gehry and Walt Disney. Are the former comrades going to become clones, destined to reside in a residential theme park, looking like distant derivatives of New Urbanism and Disney World, which were derivatives of small town utopian models? As for now, Ordos is largely devoid of population, a ghost town of globalization, its empty highways offering vanishing points into what was once the world of tomorrow.

Yet, China is much more than a mere nation-state aping the global models of Gehry and Disney. Emerging over four thousand years ago, China is a tapestry of peoples with a complexity of traditions, with roots in ancient dynasties that are now largely gone. Though it will surely not abandon all its tapestries and traditions, China seems poised to leave the lost worlds of dynasties for the new world of a dynamic global civilization. If this pattern continues, China seems destined to become a hybrid of East and West, posing the questions about how much China’s culture and traditions will shape global civilization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and how much the Western utopian models will shape China.

### *Abandoned America: Autopsy for the American Dream?*

Matthew Christopher Murray’s website for “Abandoned America” is subtitled: “An Autopsy of the American Dream.”<sup>11</sup> The explicit goal of photographs and website is “to retain the history and essence of neglected sites before (and after) they are gone forever.” The website further explains, “As our industrial sector sags and many of the social institutions that once were the pride of our country now lie in ruins, it is vital that we remember our heritage and our achievements.” These ambitions are why Abandoned America offers a vision of an

American Atlantis, a world becoming lost in slow motion, in the time frame of entropy and nature's Second Law of Thermodynamics (energy is not conserved in an isolated system; the loss of order is irreversible over time). That's why Abandoned America is situated on the "lost world" trajectory, a past time and place in America that now seems destined to disappear as it devolves into ruins of the twentieth century. Abandoned America is what comes "after utopia," the onset of dystopia and decay in a lost world.

What we should understand is that "Abandoned America" does not happen absent any cultural context. The dystopian "autopsy" of Abandoned America is in stark contrast to the utopian optimism of *Scientific American's* cover story about better, greener, and smarter cities. This difference between dystopian pessimism and utopian optimism lies in the difference between seeing the entropy of a lost world (Abandoned America) and sensing the emergence of new world (*Scientific American*), the lost industrial world versus the new mediated world. Amidst the entropy of America, is the internet leading a rebirth of ecology and intelligence in cities?

Coinciding with the end of the Cold War and the fall of the former Soviet Union, the internet began its explosive growth around 1990 and has spread across the planet, with America at the center of the explosion. Thus, over the past two decades, America has been the world's dominant superpower, while existing at the center of the internet explosion. As mentioned earlier, we can wonder if America has gotten collectively "smarter" as its populace jacks into the internet and its "intelligent" technologies? Do the sites of Abandoned America reveal some hidden cultural and technological intelligence at work? Of course, some citizens and organizations are getting smarter and wiser, but what about the overall society and culture, in a collective sense?

If Americans have collectively gotten smarter over the past two decades, then why has the American government invaded countries, bombed civilians, surveilled citizens, tortured enemy combatants, jailed war prisoners without trials, and assaulted the First Amendment with arrests of peaceful protestors and attacks on WikiLeaks? As illustrated in the ten year anniversaries and analyses of the aftermath of September 11, government leaders and virtually all of the experts in the media have failed to realize that the attacks and subsequent wars are much more about empires and sacred texts — which embrace premodern and antimodern utopias that promise spiritual purity and eternal destinies — and far less about wars to destroy or protect "freedom." Inspired by antiquated utopian models of cultural and spiritual purity, mainstream America mandates that the government ceaselessly wage wars on drugs, immigration, and various other perceived ills, all of which are celebrated by the media with endless TV shows and movies. America has the largest prison system in the world, with only 5% of the world's population, yet more than 20% of the world's prisoners; prison populations have doubled since 1990, now approaching three million people. Government money spent on prisons is exploding, now approaching the level spent on higher education, and many more prisons are being built than colleges and universities. Should we be surprised that a third of Americans are obese, evolution is denied by 40-60% of the population, and American teenagers now rank 14<sup>th</sup> in reading, 25<sup>th</sup> in math, and 17<sup>th</sup> in science in comparison to other developed nations.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, college football coaches make millions of dollars to lead the entertainment function of American universities, and NFL football players are local gods who earn tens of millions of dollars so citizens can feel good about their cities. This not to say that there are no positive or utopian trends in America, but Abandoned America is not about such trends. Plus, the list of dystopian trends seems much longer (much

more than can be mentioned here) and deeper. After all, the total U.S. debt now exceeds tens of trillions of dollars, or more than \$100,000 per person, totals that are absurd and insane. And, these dystopian trends are circulating as information in the network and entertainment on the electronic screens, those “intelligent” technologies that are supposedly making “smarter cities” and a “smarter planet.”

Many trillions of dollars have been squandered on the terror and culture wars, money which could have been used for education, ecology, infrastructure, and alternative energies in our cities, crucial issues of which Americans have been aware since at least 1970. Everyone is worried about the overall economy, but what about general sanity? Should we be surprised that parts of America lie abandoned, while the insights of Arcosanti have been ignored?

### *Arcosanti: Relic of the Future Past or Utopian Model for Spaceship Earth?*

An ongoing experimental city in the desert, Arcosanti’s utopian model seeks to integrate the past into the future, ecology with technology, preserving a natural world (that could become lost) with a new world that uses science and design to live with nature, not dominate it and remove it from our cities. Arcosanti offers a prototype with principles that are local and global, and thus good for Gaia and the network society. It’s a sad commentary on the state of utopian theory and practice that Arcosanti has not had a much larger impact on design and architecture, especially in America. This is not to say that Arcosanti has had no influence, just that it is minimal compared to the models that have driven suburban sprawl, urban hubris, and terror wars.

Once a student of Frank Lloyd Wright, Paolo Soleri, the creator of Arcosanti, shares his theories of arcology with an ever-changing cast of international artists and workshop students who visit or live at Arcosanti. Soleri believes that all of nature reflects the inexorable drives toward “complexity” (clustered living processes), “miniaturization” (maximum utility of resources and space-time), and “duration” (living processes and energy use across time).<sup>13</sup> These processes imply that successful community living should approximate a “living organism” that is “coherent” with the “complexity-miniaturization-duration paradigm.” Arcosanti expresses these principles in confronting urban decay and suburban sprawl, within a framework of renewable energy, self-sustaining agriculture, and compact multi-functional spaces connected in a structural totality. Of course, this utopian idea anticipated the now common idea that urban density is more energy efficient and ecologically sustainable than single-person residences in the suburbs and small towns, given current energy technologies. That problem could be eliminated, though, with a radical breakthrough in solar power, which is the best hope for humanity’s long-term energy needs.

But Arcosanti is more than a model for urban density and complexity. Arcosanti is a utopian model born of the Earth and open to the cosmos. Many of Arcosanti’s structures and building materials come from the nearby desert landscape, and its buildings are designed to take advantage of solar patterns and prevailing wind conditions for lighting, heating, and cooling the city. The open air spaces welcome the sky and desert, in contrast to the electrified metropolises, whose skyscrapers may point toward the stars, but their residents are far removed from nature and the cosmos, now hidden by the electric glow.

Soleri apparently took to heart Wright’s utopian model of “organic architecture,” which means that form and function come together in the architectural design, the purpose of the

structure, the nature of the materials, and the surrounding landscapes and environments. Arcosanti seems aimed to integrate the city, not only into nature and the environment, but also into the cosmos, to make a living space that is open to the space beyond. Having spent several days at Arcosanti, I can personally attest to the sense that the overall structure is anchored in the Earth below, yet open to the universe beyond. Arcosanti seems to embrace Buckminster Fuller's humanist challenge about "how to maintain man as a success in the universe," which he discussed in the 1969 book, *Utopia or Oblivion*.<sup>14</sup> In *Arcosanti: An Urban Laboratory?*, Soleri realizes we need living structures that are welcoming of the cosmos and our relation to it: "We would therefore like to cultivate an environment where structures and grids would make astronomical sensitivity a normal presence."<sup>15</sup>

In my judgment, the combination of arcological ideas and existential cosmic stance makes Arcosanti one of the most important utopian models of the past forty years. Arcosanti was born in 1970, the year after the Apollo 11 moon landing and two years after Apollo 8's famed "Earthrise" image, which showed humans to be a global species in a global ecosystem, all existing on a single small planet floating in the vast cosmic void. This meaning meant that humans are not the center of the universe, but we possess the power to embrace, explore, and understand the universe from which we emerged and evolved.

Perhaps this time was the peak moment for modernity and the utopian possibilities of a humane global civilization based on a humanist cosmology, featuring the integration of ecology and technology into a new model for designing and building our cities on our planet, which Fuller famously called "Spaceship Earth." Though Soleri hoped Arcosanti could realize the utopian ideas pregnant in the moment after Apollo 8 and Apollo 11, most of civilization ignored Arcosanti as well as the meanings of Earthrise. Since Apollo 11, Apollo 8, and Earthrise, it seems as if the space age yielded an unintended effect at its penultimate moment, a cosmic vertigo in which humans could not handle the existential meaning of their greatest accomplishment.<sup>16</sup> As Soleri stated in explaining the need for a "cosmic" architecture: "The minute and the immense are confronting our existence."<sup>17</sup>

This cosmic stance is what makes Arcosanti so radical a concept, for it offers a direct challenge to the existential view of nearly all urban, suburban, and domestic architecture and technology, all of which combine to sequester humans away from nature and the universe. Just look at the millions of suburban homes, hunched under their pitched roofs, with walls containing tiny windows, all suggesting a structure afraid of nature and terrified of the cosmos above. Many of the urban homes are no better, squeezed together and shielded from nature and sky. Should we be surprised that television and computers dominate the lives and "realities" of the citizens, even more so at night? It is no wonder that nature becomes a "lost world" in our cities and suburbs, though that effect was not necessarily the original intent.

As humans migrate to the mechanized metropolises (urban and suburban), glowing with electric light and electronic screens, they are slowly, but certainly, removing themselves from nature and the cosmos from which they emerged and evolved. It is our electric cities and electronic screens that make us feel as if we are the center of everything, when actually we are the center of nothing. And, it is the nothings and nothingnesses that most everyone fears — the emptiness of absence and being alone (on Earth or in the cosmos), the possibility of no meaning to life, the uncertainty of the future, and the vast voids of the cosmos we inhabit. That's why Facebook and social media are much less about the desire to connect than the dread of being alone, adrift in cyberspace and outer space. Of course, humans are social

animals and we organize our cities and rituals to give us a sense of meaning and destiny in the universe. Such meaning and destiny are the key existential function of utopian models.

If Abandoned America shows human absence in a lost world and Ordos shows the current absence of humans from a new world, then Arcosanti shows the presence of nature and the cosmos in a future city. At the existential level, Arcosanti stands in contrast to the absence of nature and the cosmos from our current cities. With the curves and arches of its poured concrete superstructure emerging from the desert, Arcosanti itself seems like a relic from the future, unearthed from the sands of the past in an ongoing archaeological dig.

Let's hope Arcosanti is not a contemporary version of the "great houses" built by the Ancestral Puebloans (also known as the Anasazi) in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. The Ancestral Puebloans (approximately 800-1200 CE) displayed a stunning cosmological knowledge. As Anna Sofaer discovered and explained, they created the famed "sun daggers" petroglyph, which used light and shadow from natural rock formations to map the sun on its journey through the skies, with a brilliant design that denotes solstices and equinoxes. Built with nearby materials, the great houses were designed to reflect the cosmic order in the stars above, with the main walls and roads aligned with north and south directional lines, which seem to be derived in part from the solar solstices and equinoxes and the location of Polaris, the pole star in due north.<sup>18</sup> Not unlike Atlantis, the Ancestral Puebloans suddenly died out and disappeared, apparently due to drought, climate change, environmental destruction, and tribal warfare.<sup>19</sup> Yet, their great houses still remain as beautiful ruins, with the art and architecture serving as symbols of a civilization that sought to align itself with nature and the cosmos. Arcosanti deserves a much different fate in the future.

Of course, we cannot utterly remake our existing cities to be more aligned to the stars and open to the cosmos, which is an impossible proposition. We can surely make the existing cities more ecologically sustainable. But, perhaps our new architecture and new cities can also inspire humans to be "a success in the universe," surely a worthy goal given that we live in a new millennium plagued with tribal and religious warfare. Though we are not living in the utopian heyday of the space age and ecological theory of the late 1960s, the challenges posed by Fuller and Soleri still seem like noble ambitions.

Inspired by sites like Arcosanti and exhibits like "Before and After Utopia," perhaps we can create new cultural, architectural, and utopian cosmologies that embrace the existential conditions we face on Earth and in the cosmos. The evolutionary product of stardust, we are a species that share 99.9% of the same DNA and lives on a planet — Spaceship Earth — floating in a vast expanding universe of which we are not the center. These existential conditions should not make us feel small and alone, but rather illustrate the power of our minds and inspire us to think big about our lives, our destinies, and our ability to live within the ecology and biosphere on Spaceship Earth while embracing and exploring our place in the cosmos beyond. Such thinking could lead to the ultimate ecological, technological and cosmological moment, the moment *before utopia*, the chance and challenge to move beyond "now" in a more sane manner. Only then we will have entered the millennium. And, as Soleri reminds us, in offering such an challenge, "we can only speak to the future."<sup>20</sup>

## BIO

Barry Vacker teaches media and cultural theory at Temple University (Philadelphia) where he is an Associate Professor and the Faculty Teaching Mentor in the School of Communication and Theater. Vacker has taught media courses for seventeen years and authored many

articles on art, media, culture, and technology. Most recently, he edited the text anthology, *Media Environments* (Cognella Academic Publishing, 2011), which includes contributions from Stephen Hawking, Al Gore, Naomi Wolf, Carl Sagan, Ray Kurzweil, Neil Postman, Jean Baudrillard, Neil deGrasse Tyson, Naomi Klein, and many others. Other recent publications include the text for Peter Granser's photography book, *Signs* (Hatje Cantz and the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Photography, 2008), which has been featured in exhibitions around the world. He also wrote and directed the experimental documentary, *Space Times Square* (2007), which has screened in festivals around the world and received the 2010 John Culkin Award for Outstanding Praxis in the Field of Media Ecology, an international award from by the Media Ecology Association. Vacker also published four experimental books on utopian theory, which are available on Amazon.com; one of those books, *Slugging Nothing: Fighting the Future in Fight Club*, reached number 1 in the "Criticism" section of Kindle.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979); Krishnan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Roland Schaer, Gregory Claeys, and Lymon Tower Sargent, eds., *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World* (New York: The New York Public Library and Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Frederic Rouvillois, "Utopia and Totalitarianism," in *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*; John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Timothy O. Benson, *Expressionist Utopias: Paradise, Metropolis, Architectural Fantasy* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art 1994); Jean-Louis Cohen, *Scenes of the World to Come: European Architecture and the American Challenge* (Paris: Flammarion 1995); Franco Borsi, *Architecture and Utopia* (Paris: Editions Hazan, 1997); Oliver Herzog and Florian Holzherr, *Dreams World: Architecture and Entertainment* (Munich: Prestel, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Erik Mattie, *World's Fairs* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998); Robert Rosenblum (et al), *Remembering the Future: The New York World's Fair from 1939 to 1964* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989); Carl Malamud, *A World's Fair for the Global Village* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997); Alfred Heller, *World's Fairs and the End of Progress* (Corte Madera, Ca.: World's Fair Inc., 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Desmond Lee (New York: Penguin Classics, 1971).

<sup>6</sup> Of course, all of these films are very complex, with more than one theme and several plotlines. This discussion is only highlighting the central utopian-dystopian themes.

<sup>7</sup> Carlo Ratti and Anthony Townsend, "The Social Nexus," *Scientific American*, Volume 305, Number 3 (September 2011): 42-48.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Hawking, "Our Future? *Star Trek* or Not?" in *The Universe in a Nutshell* (New York: Random House, 2001): 157-171.

<sup>9</sup> Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam 1967).

<sup>10</sup> Among many: Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994); Jean Baudrillard, *Screened Out* (London: Verso, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> <http://abandonedamerica.us>. Website accessed September 9, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Jessica Shepherd, "World Education rankings: which country does best at reading, maths, and science?" *The Guardian* (September 7, 2010). <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/dec/07/world-education-rankings-maths-science-reading>. Accessed September 9, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Paolo Soleri, *Arcosanti: An Urban Laboratory?* (Mayer, Az: Cosanti Press, 1983): 11.

<sup>14</sup> R. Buckminster Fuller, *Utopia or Oblivion: The Prospects for Humanity* (New York: Bantam 1969).

<sup>15</sup> Soleri, *Arcosanti: An Urban Laboratory?*, 80.

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<sup>16</sup> Barry Vacker, "Lone Stars, Lost Amidst the Big Bang," in Peter Granser (photographer), *Signs* (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz and the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Photography, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Soleri, *Arcosanti: An Urban Laboratory?*, 80.

<sup>18</sup> Anna Sofaer, *Chaco Astronomy: An Ancient American Cosmology* (Santa Fe: Ocean Tree Books, 2008); J. McKim Malville, *Guide to Prehistoric Astronomy in the Southwest* (Boulder, Colo.: Johnson Books, 2008): 32-35, 49-79.

<sup>19</sup> Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin, 2006): 136-156.

<sup>20</sup> Soleri, *Arcosanti: An Urban Laboratory?*, 75.