

NOTES

- ¹ 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 Schaefer, 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).
- ² 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).
- ³ 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 Holzger, *Dream Worlds: Architecture and Entertainment* (Munich: Prestel, 2006).
- ⁴ 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).
- ⁵ Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Desmond Lee (New York: Penguin Classics, 1971).
- ⁶ Of course, all of these films are very complex, with more than one theme and several plotlines. This discussion is only highlighting the essential utopian-dystopian themes.
- ⁷ Carlo Ratti and Anthony Townsend, "The Social Nexus," *Scientific American*, Volume 305, Number 3 (September 2011): 42-48.
- ⁸ Stephen Hawking, "Our Future? *Star Trek* or Not?" in *The Universe in a Nutshell* (New York: Random House, 2001): 157-171.
- ⁹ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam 1967).
- ¹⁰ 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).
- ¹¹ <http://abandonedamerica.us>. Website accessed September 9, 2011.
- ¹² 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.
- ¹³ Paolo Soleri, *Arcosanti: An Urban Laboratory?* (Mayer, Az: Cosanti Press, 1983): 11.
- ¹⁴ R. Buckminster Fuller, *Utopia or Oblivion: The Prospects for Humanity* (New York: Bantam 1969).
- ¹⁵ Soleri, *Arcosanti: An Urban Laboratory?*, 80.
- ¹⁶ 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).
- ¹⁷ Soleri, *Arcosanti: An Urban Laboratory?*, 80.
- ¹⁸ 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.
- ¹⁹ Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin, 2006): 136-156.
- ²⁰ Soleri, *Arcosanti: An Urban Laboratory?*, 75.

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THE UTOPIAN MOMENT, NOW?

Barry Vacker



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

Photographs by

Matthew Christopher, *Abandoned America* Michael Christopher Brown, *Ordos*

Joshua Lieberman, *Arcosanti*

Michael Meysarosh, *Masdar*

The Open Lens Gallery at The Gershman Y, Philadelphia, PA

September 15 - November 20, 2011

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Text to accompany the exhibit **Before and After Utopia: Images of Urban Abandonment, Absence and Aspiration**

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

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 the grand title — "Before and After Utopia" — is the juxtaposition of utopian and dystopian ideas in the images of all four photographers.

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 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 21st 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.

In the selection of these four sites and images, Antsis suggests the challenges and solutions facing global metropolises are not merely political, technological, or ecological — they are also existential and philosophical. Antsis 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 all say something about how we connect, effect, and essentially, transform our cities. 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 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 environments we inhabit, now and in the foreseeable future. In the exhibit we witness the relics of an abandoned America, an empty globalization in Ordos, and the hopes and aspirations in the utopian models of Arcosanti and Masdar. We 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.

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.¹⁸ Not unlike Atlantis, the Ancestral Puebloans suddenly died out and disappeared, apparently due to drought, climate change, environmental destruction, and tribal warfare.¹⁹ 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 sane manner. Only then we will we have entered the new millennium. And, as Soleri reminds us, in offering such a challenge, "we can only speak to the future."²⁰

BIOGRAPHY

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 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.