

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 human inhabitants 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. 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 modified or canceled. 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 21st Century?

In contrast to American entropy, China represents not only a nation, but also a vast and complex civilization on the rise, moving toward a higher order. That trajectory is why Ordos mostly expresses a “new world” model, a hybrid between monumental modern and post-modern architecture, a sprawl of suburban simulacra, and copies of suburban models and architectures from America (which are copies of architectures from Europe and other parts of the world). In Ordos, we see

original post-modern 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? 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 21st century and how much the Western utopian models will shape China.



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

Matthew Christopher’s website for *Abandoned America* is subtitled: “An Autopsy of the American Dream.”<sup>11</sup> The explicit goal of the photographs and the 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

- or any world “lost” to evolution or entropy.
- or any world that is “new” or innovative.

**EXHIBIT:**

- Abandoned America
- Masdar, Ordos
- Arcosanti is a hybrid of both lost and new.

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 to 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. 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, which seek to simulate the past in a permanent now, like a movie playing on a 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 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. For Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*, the desired utopian model is a return to a pre-modern, 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, and 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. IS THERE A 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. The sites documented in *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," living as we are 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% 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 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 simplistic 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 of 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 eight to twelve hours gazing at screens each day, surely they must be getting smarter and wiser with access to an overabundance of information and knowledge. Of course, such increasing enlightenment is possible, and it is happening for some people and organizations. However, the effect of media technology is never that simple because it is not neutral in its effect on consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

For most everyone, screens are far less about exploring and gaining essential new perspectives on reality than they are about reflecting people's own views back to themselves. 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 screens as "maps" for exploring and navigating the territories of our lives, and most everyone spends hours in front of the screens of their choosing, 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 also runs throughout 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 the following: tsunamis, earthquakes, Mayan prophecies, ecological disasters, “hyper” hurricanes leveling several cities at once, “super” volcanoes burying continents under lava, comets and asteroids smashing the Earth, and supernovas scorching our planet. “Dark energy” may eventually rip apart every atom in the entire universe! The list is virtually endless. 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?

The utopian “new world” promised by commercial advertising and corporations has a non-stop celebrity-consumer-communication agenda, where every product promises hedonistic pleasure, and people will buy, drive, wear, eat, link, connect, chat, text, and gaze upon their own reflections in the glow of micro-fame. 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. These conditions suggest new utopian models are needed.

## 6. BEFORE AND AFTER UTOPIA

Olivia Antsis has produced a timely and provocative exhibit, presenting four photographers who offer different aesthetic and philosophical perspectives than most of those dominating our contemporary culture and media environments. The im-

ages 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 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 new millennium? 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 its citizenry. We may be living after the failed utopia-dystopia of communism, but what are the “utopias” that lie before us? Are they from the future or the past? Or are they yet more dystopian in practice?

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 pre-modern Atlantis, a lost world with coastal cities standing amidst rising sea levels and other cities depleting the planet’s fossil fuel energy resources.



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