

The End of Fictionalism," October 3, 2014

It was about a decade and a half into the new century. By that time the term 'design competition' had become a euphemism for a cheap method to gather ideas, be it from an anxious flock of increasingly redundant professionals, or 'crowd sourced' under the populist banner of participation. Hollow ideas, to be gifted to the Managers of the Pragmatic City—outsourced overseers, overdrawn both financially and ideologically. The notion of a design exercise strengthening the discourse, by way of being provocative instead of merely practical, was rapidly vanishing. Amongst the plethora of idea scavenging missions, one competition stood out. The Prix, with its commitment to being disciplinary and explicitly fictional, remained the single outlet that celebrated autonomous 'excellence.' The possibility of 'fiction' offered obvious opportunities that actual, realistic assignments did not. In the ideological drought afflicting society, the Prix was a last semblance of Culture for Culture's sake. The reward was modest; indeed, the honor lay in being given the liberty to dream.

This particular year, the freedom offered was irresistible. In their wisdom, the organizers of The Prix specified only two coordinates (51°55'16"N / 4°29'14"E) as the locus of inquiry, rather than dictating an excessively circumscribed program or an overly defined target user. The point given marked the crossing of two axes that were once significant. Many years prior, centuries ago, this spot had been at the belly-button of what was considered an important town. It had been the birthplace of Humanism, the place par excellence of Progress, a city where things got done. Destroyed during the Big Fire, it had manfully rebuilt its empty heart. The city's spirit had been confident and clear. But somehow, over three quarters of a century, the soul had become tarnished. One came to realize that the core of the city, despite multiple open-heart surgeries, had become a place that epitomized the bleakness of the ideological landscape of the day.

With the Big Fire's centennial, and the 700th anniversary of the birth of the city only a quarter century away the Managers of the Pragmatic City grew anxious. It was increasingly clear that the population harbored a burning desire for real-ness. The urge to rediscover and reconstruct the city's True Spirit was palpable. Clueless about how to enact this, the Managers commissioned a team of Experts to define the city's authentic identity. A voluminous document embossed with bold black letters was produced. RO-TOPIA 2040. Its countless pages identified four greatly differing possible DNA's for the city:

**Hardcore
Nostalgia Now!
Human Spirit
Bio Maas**

In its conclusion, the Experts recommended the city to use the remaining 25 years to transform the city into one of these four possible identities. A circle measuring

exactly 700 meters diameter was drawn around the 'navel' of the city. Inside the Ring the city was to be restructured in such a way that its Authentic Self would become self-evident.

Not necessarily because of any disagreement, more compelled out of habit, the Managers reached the consensus that all four visions would be enacted, but each of them only partly. The historic axes, the Rotte and Hooghstraat, acted as ostensibly objective lines to generate four sectors in which these visions would be carried out. After completion, and once each sector's Genuine Feel was evaluated, the Managers would model the remaining quarters after the frontrunner. Each sector appointed its own council, the Planners, in charge of construction, demolition and media. Soon after the process began, these councils grew ambitious and competitive. All wanted to be seen as the real original. Buildings that embodied a DNA judged as "wrong" for their sector were demolished, or swapped with buildings out of a competing sector. Occasionally, entire blocks would be taken down and relocated to a more appropriate sector. As was local custom, unbuilt or destroyed historic buildings would be resurrected if deemed beneficial to strengthening the identity. This was done not only to deepen the corresponding sector's authenticity, but also to boost the city's ailing building industry.

Sector – Hardcore

RO-TOPIA is the country's only true Metropolis. Not a place for the namby-pamby, the cowards, and milksops, this city is no-nonsense, incessantly remade by and for those who do—the highfliers, the ruthless. In this city, the sun shines brighter, the clouds cast darker shadows. The city's spirit is unpolished; its cars gleaming. Anything goes, as long as one offers a brief reason. RO-TOPIANS work to the rhythm of piles being driven, cranes whizzing over concrete skeletons, and the steady drumroll of jackhammers freeing up building space. Like the hardcore house music it inspired, ROTOPIA is everything but "snobby and pretentious." Here city dwellers can swagger in anonymity, allowing hookers, oligarchs, office clerks, and dealers to prosper in this dense domain of opportunity. Progress comes out of confrontation, persistence prevails.

Perpetually accelerating—trailing only slightly behind its Asian sisters—this city is a laboratory of the future. Everything is measured and improved. Drones, robots, and connected servers provide real-time feedback on all aspects of urban life. The council carefully monitors RO-TOPIA's progress. The city has no history and no style, only a set of dynamic rules, which are continuously optimized. Unimpeded by sentimentalism or moralism, density burgeons. BIM-modeling allows builders to update buildings as they go up. Real-time adaptation saves the city's leadership both time and energy finding alternative purposes for existing structures. Any structure 'unfit' for survival as indicated by the data—will either be adapted or demolished. In buildings awaiting processing, residents are replaced by highly profitable pop-up sewing workshops or other short term high yield opportunities.

One can see RO-TOPIA as the ultimate chance for an optimistic, technocentric

Modernity. Like nature has no repository for missing links, RO-TOPIA has no landmarks. It does not preserve. In RO-TOPIA nothing is ever obsolete.

Sector–Nostalgia Now!

The Big Fire destroyed RO-TOPIA’s center, but did not dent its pride. In line with the great tradition of urban planning, this is not a chaotic city, but a recognizable ensemble of specific neighborhoods. A street is a street, a square a square, a dock a dock. Simple and clear. Every neighborhood has its own particular history, its characters and heroes. Every quarter has its own cafe, where real people discuss in great detail daily events over an honest drink. Most of these neighborhoods are only one or two city blocks in size, yet you can hear a slight difference in accents between their inhabitants. People here tell it like it is! Most families have been here for multiple generations—uncles and grand- mothers, rough diamonds, making a living as scrimshanders or boatswains. People come from all walks of life, but respect each other and their surroundings. Children and elderly organize joint activities to meet and learn from each other. One can say that the city, and its people, are timeless.

These proud inhabitants form the city’s backbone. They love their city; they consider it a work of art. The buildings, built in an unmistakable Dutch style, are everlasting, well proportioned, symmetrical, made from real brick, with real roofs. The streets are clean and safe. Zero tolerance is imposed on those who don’t play by the rules. Public shaming has been reinstated to deal with such individuals. Rather than fanciful abstractions, larger than life statues of Real Heroes, such as Piet Hein and Pim Fortuyn, mark the center of squares. People here decide for themselves whether something is culture or not. They don’t need other people’s opinions. Or their expensive coins for that matter: In this city, the reintroduction of the Guilder a plain and common sense currency—is just one referendum away. As are many unifying plans. Citizens’ initiatives increase engagement with the social environment such that people can be proud of their own neighborhood again. The city’s recently built ambitious new football stadium is an exact copy of its beloved predecessor, albeit with optimized security features. It is therefore equally beloved.

RO-TOPIA is unique in that it is refreshingly uncreative. An alternative to the less democratic, and economically driven trend of the so-called Creative Cities—an elitist neo-liberal manipulation of artistic pursuit- produces space for people to live a straightforward and free life. RO-TOPIA is a city for real people. It is built on common ground and shared values—burgerkracht. Understandably RO-TOPiANS are intent to keep it that way. Here all traditions are selfevident. Sinterklaas en Zwarte Piet don’t change either. Simple.

Sector– Human Spirit

Erasmus bestowed upon this city its true spirit. Collective and tolerant, the city can be seen as an imaginative constellation, celebrating common human needs,

and achieving these through participation. Here we seek both rational and spiritual ways of solving the world's challenges. Freedom of expression, experimentation, respect for others, knowledge and culture, tolerance and education, these are the touchstones we live by. The sector is not divided into functions, as there is only one function in this city: to live.

RO-TOPIA is an open structure that supports all of humankind's endeavors. Envisioned top down, but built bottom up by volunteers who have been working since the commencement of the project in 2015, the city provides a variety of mixed-use buildings and public spaces where people live, work, visit, and engage in educational and cultural programs. The sector can be understood as one big allotment garden, a beehive of DIY creativity, filled with stalls, domes, and barter bars — a bazaar of different aromas — invariably with diminutives — trinkets, chotchkies, the funny Chinese with their sarongs, baba ganoush, tutti-frutti, ying yang jong. The city is a permanently evolving event.

In RO-TOPIA there are few individual possessions. It's an urban laboratory of innovative design, community, and environmental accountability. We share streets, chairs, bikes, beds, time, tasks and space. RO-TOPIA has no individual leadership. Our most enlightened define the path forward while all is agreed upon in harmony. Naturally, a well mediated public forum is essential for successful spontaneous self-organization. Especially with RO-TOPIA closing in on the fulfilment of its social promise. Have all variables been accounted for? Is there enough consensus? Should more voices of dissent be included? These are pertinent questions when weaving this ambitious urban fabric. Although RO-TOPIA generates many answers, much depends on communication, on an open, inclusive, discourse. Clarifying to a community of newcomers for example, that participating in RO-TOPIA's secular humanist tradition, offers the possibility to build an elaborately ornamented house of worship such that it can easily be converted into a cultural- or wellness center. RO-TOPIA is a tolerant and supportive environment where progressive thinking is integral to all aspects of life. It is also a place of wonder. Much thought has been put into leaving just the right amount to the public imagination. 'Hè wat is dit, is dit nou een paleis of een kermis?'

Sector – BIO-Maas

Defined by the convergence of land and water, RO-TOPIA is best understood as an Urban Metabolism, a dynamic network of eddies and flows. It is a complex, vast, and interdependent system, continuously at work to meet the needs and desires of all its inhabitants. In this metabolic urbanity nothing is static. While wind, tide, sunlight, body heat, and biofuel generate a surplus of energy, enough to power each of the other sectors, continuous up-cycling has eradicated the need for any further resources.

Thus RO-TOPIA has seen the emergence of an economy of happiness and leisure, where a minimum need for labour eliminated all inequality. Not just between the city's social classes but also between its many different species. This eco-emancipation spawned a free-range residential model in which all beings symbiotically co-exist. Roaming their shared habitat like semi-nomadic dwellers, RO-TOPIANS are able to constantly adapt to changing conditions while keeping their environmental impact to a minimum.

RO-TOPIA is ecologically resilient rather than ecologically imperiled. Centuries of experience with comprehensive water management have taught the city to embrace the forces of change and – in a form of Ecological Judo – to use them to its advantage. This means that among the world's port cities, RO-TOPIA is uniquely positioned to mitigate the effects of climate change. Instead of posing a threat to RO-TOPIA's social and economic prosperity, global warming may very well present our metabolic community with a once in a lifetime opportunity. As the RO-TOPIAN saying goes: A rising sea level lifts all boats.

Like climate change, the confluence of culture and nature, of men and mussel, authority and otter, has political as well as ethical implications. No longer is humanity solely responsible for solving nature's problems. The green roof, the Heck bull, the photolytic algae, in RO-TOPIA's ecological participation society, nature is expected to fill the void left by a retreating city government. With freedom come responsibilities. While RO-TOPIA has taken the form of an organism, its cellular building blocks perpetually replicating, mutating, and metabolizing, the city's living creatures are becoming increasingly technological. In our model city for 22nd century living, molecular engineering, nano-architecture, and smart ecology all equally contribute to a blissful, innovative, and sustainable society. Hence RO-TOPIA is no throwback to a 'Walden' idyll. By optimizing the existing natural interdependence between all species RO-TOPIA is representing the opposite of Thoreau's idea of going back to nature. Rather, it sees becoming nature – be it an enhanced nature – as the inevitable way forward.

Plan-o-tarium

To make it unmistakably clear, the Planners implemented a marking of the two original axes. The Rotte was reinstated as a body of water North of the original Hooghstraat. Towards the South, the Maas was allowed to flow back into the city. To appease angry vendors who had their stalls expropriated, the Hooghstraat was transformed into a free trade zone between the sectors. The Planners provided an open framed structure, mimicking the original houses along the Hoogstraat, that accommodated stands. A souk of memorabilia and ephemera flourished. First come, first served. The Markthal, which after a triumphant stint in 2015 was soon left vacant, eventually was rejigged into an automated vessel, crawling back and forth over the ridged roofs of the stalls, collecting and composting market waste. A limited occupancy observation deck offered well heeled sightseers the opportunity to observe this radical urban experiment from up close. For the less fortu-

nate, the Planners installed an elevated walkway circumscribing the sectors, The Ringbaan.

RO-TOPIA's division into four Sectors polarized their respective identities. Confrontation and clashes between the quarter's inhabitants erupted soon, both on the Hooghstraat and the docks along the Rotte. A forum was needed to settle disputes, and to debate progress in the respective zones. At the heart of RO-TOPIA, the Planners erected a new civic building. The Plan-o-tarium opened in 2020 – a large sphere with a diameter of sixty meters. A sphere is abstract, yet universal. Deeming its formal neutrality not sufficient however, the sphere was left floating, so not to restrain it by any quadrant. The colliding currents of Rotte and Maas kept it in place and produced a vortex that spun this large sphere in easeful perpetual motion. The dripping wet exterior of the sphere reflected and distorted the surrounding city. Small punctures in its thick hull let in glimpses of the sectors as they took shape, creating magical, warped camera obscura projections inside the sphere.

Once a month, during the new moon, the currents gyrated such that the sphere stopped spinning and would float relatively stable for three full days. Charon, a boating company, would offer barge rides to and fro the sphere. It was during these hours of quiet that the Sector Heads would gather to exchange insights, discuss how the Authenticity was advancing and to prepare a record for the Managers of the City. Semi-public benches behind the Sector Heads and their experts allowed engaged citizens to observe these civic acts.

For over two decades, the project progressed steadily and was showing remarkable results, until a disastrous turn of events occurred. During the last moon cycle before the completion of RO-TOPIA 2040, a rare planetary alignment disturbed the carefully calibrated vortex. At the height of a heated debate, a titanic sea swell suddenly lifted the sphere, its Planners locked inside, to unimaginable height and slammed it into the historic center of a sister city East of the border, leaving that town destroyed. Architecture is the continuation of war by other means. Meanwhile, rudderless, the citizens of RO-TOPIA escaped their sectors leaving this bold urban experiment abandoned...

History unfolds as a series of events. Secondary stories coalesce and become a grand narrative, the history of a people, and the history of a place. The physical world we inhabit emerges from these various stories, incidents happenstance played out. Thousands of parallel histories exist, and as such, unlimited alternative realities. Each individual inhabits his own story. Form follows Fiction.