

HOW SIMPLE LIFE DECONSTRUCTS

UTOPIA

– STEFFEN KRÄMER AND MAXIMILIAN SCHICH

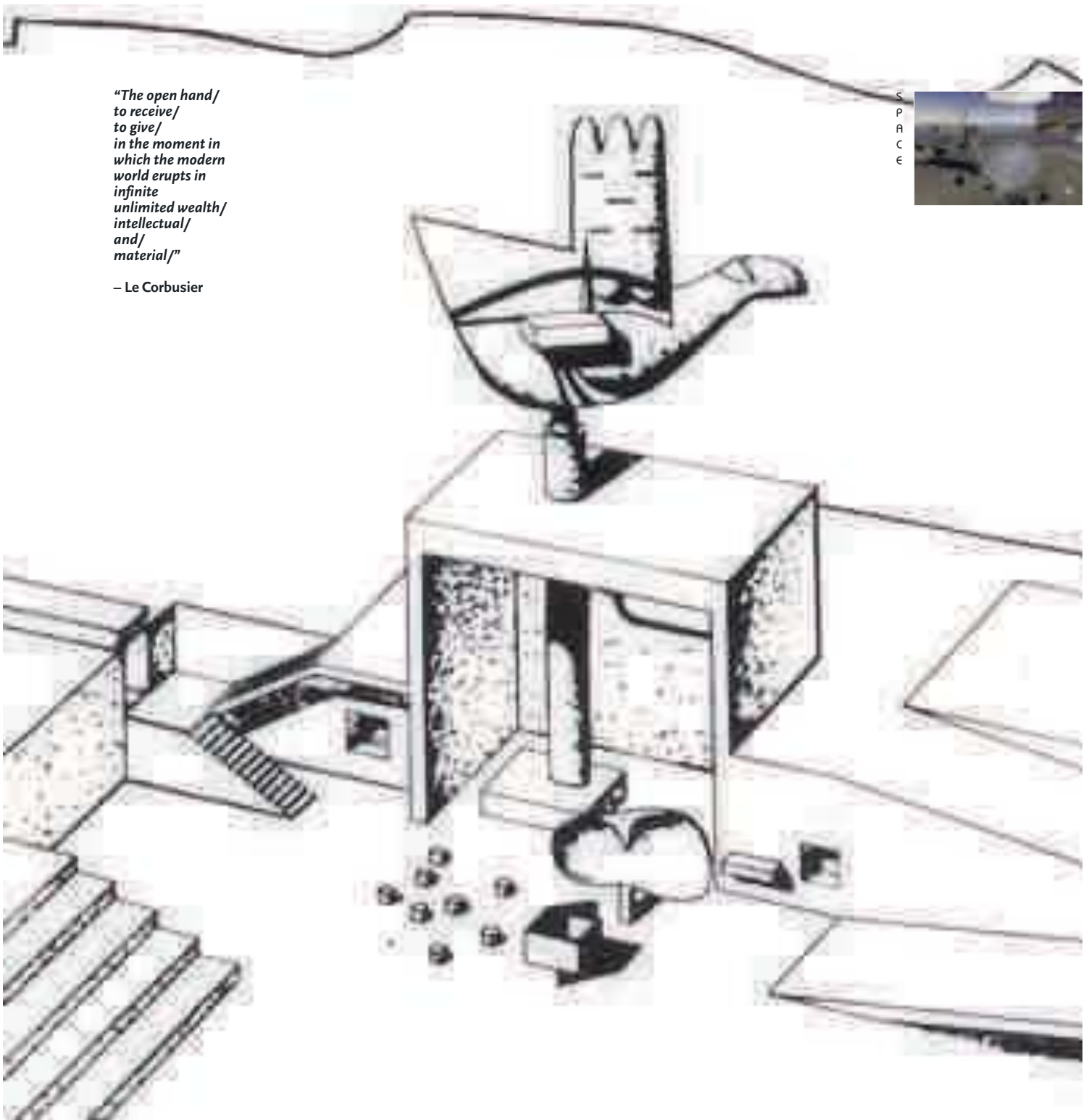
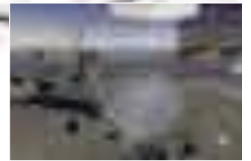
The *Second Life* logo combines Le Corbusier's open hand with the eye as a hieroglyph of God. Above is an example from *Horapollo*, published in Paris in 1551. The eye hovers here above Roman ruins.



*"The open hand/
to receive/
to give/
in the moment in
which the modern
world erupts in
infinite
unlimited wealth/
intellectual/
and/
material/"*

– Le Corbusier

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Complexity and Convention

by Maximilian Schich

Nothing comes out of nothing”¹ is how art historian Ernst Gombrich once summed up the notion that in art history there are no developments without antecedents. Second Life is a development of that kind. The roots of this “virtual” world in fact go back to things that are often extraneous to the digital world people so readily describe as a new kind of medium, either to set themselves up as prophets of the new or to find an excuse for ignoring the subject. If you look at Second Life naively as an outsider – which is just what we are doing here – your view may initially be distorted according to your morality.² But if you take a wider view of Second Life or the phenomenon of simulated virtual 3D spaces as a whole, some useful insights can be gained relative to the history of art.³

In the present essay, we explore a number of characteristics of Second Life in pictures and words, convinced that the insights they reveal will be interesting for users as well as from an art-historical point of view. As is pointed out more than once in this book, Second Life is reminiscent of a utopia, i.e. an artificially created or imaginary ideal world. In fact, Second Life is an environment constructed by man. But in contrast to many historical utopias we shall go into in more detail, it is not only ideal or simple. Second Life often looks incomprehensible as well, apparently chaotic and complex. Ultimately, Second Life is both utopia and reality, simple and complex, beautiful and ugly, trivial and interesting.

The complexity of Second Life is easily explained. Instead of being defined by a single author or handful of authors, Second Life is the result of a variable application of the minimal definition of its basic components. Instead of creating a world, users produce individual parts of an environment with the help of a limited vocabulary, the interaction of which produces complexity that, at least superficially, increasingly comes to resemble the real world. As in other systems, for example the metabolism of a cell, traffic in the street or stock-exchange trading, here too global complexity arises as a consequence of activity at a local level.⁴

That is in stark contrast to the classic utopia. Unlike the visions of many an architect, no central idea is imposed on users of Second Life. In fact, as a result of the local activity of so many participants, there is a global dynamic and structure that can be controlled by individuals or a central authority only to a limited extent or not at all. As in a real state, it is necessary to adapt certain rules to actualities.⁵ The actualities cannot be fixed in advance. Universal altruism and omnipresent rationality are for example just as utopian in Second Life as in real life.

Despite the inherent complexity arising from the interaction of the participants, large tracts of Second Life look dead. It never attains the density of the morning rush hour or a really good party, for example. Thinly populated is the normal state of things in Second Life, and there are no exceptions. Time and again, the scene looks like familiar pictures from all sorts of periods – the utopias from Urbino, Piranesi’s prisons or de Chirico’s squares. Like Archigram’s *Gallery Project* we feel lost in a cacophony of shape and colour.

Why this absence of density? Like any man made thing, Second Life is based on various



Giovanni Battista Piranesi:
Carceri d'invenzione, Untitled
(The Staircase with Trophies)
(2nd state), etching, ca. 1750.
Disoriented we navigate
through the labyrinth of
invention. The wide angle
of view confirms our
imprisonment in the cartesian
precision of construction.



Giorgio De Chirico:
Piazza d'Italia con sole
spento, 1971, oil on canvas.
Imagine you are looking at an
empty Italian square, isolated
architecture and a monument
you don't understand.
Promising landscapes appear
in the distance. You switch
off the sun. Bored – but
metaphysical indeed.



Anonymous. Ideal City, oil on
panel, around 1480 (Walters
Art Gallery, Baltimore). Clarity
results from perfect isolation of
basic building archetypes, like
the palace, the amphitheatre,
the arch or the octagon. The
tyranny of the geometrical does
not allow for dirt, irregularity or
ultimately life.

conventions, i.e. agreements between the authors that set up a limited frame of reference. Probably Second Life's most important deviation from real life in this frame of reference derives from the technical infrastructure: With the assistance of a large number of server computers, Second Life simulates the three-dimensional "grid".⁶ Each server in the group is responsible for an area of 256 m squared, defined as a "sim" (as in simulation). All objects represented in this grid space are made up of pre-defined primary forms, called "prims". The number of prims per area is currently limited to 15,000. As the representations of users ("avatars") are likewise treated as prims, these are also subject to this limitation.⁷ There is thus a direct proportionality of the simulated area to the maximum number of objects and also the number of people present at the same time. If the number of people and objects is to be increased, you can get round it to some extent, like the winner in the competition, but ultimately the area needs additional servers to cope.





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Reality transcends into the sky: Andrea Pozzo's ceiling fresco in the Church of Sant' Ignazio in Rome. The windows and the arch on the far left are real. The architecture above is as virtual as the painted sky. And there is no gravity for the cloud of St. Ignatius.



Reality escapes from the grid. The Roman city of Thamugadi was initially laid out as a grid by the Emperor Trajan and then grew organically outside the walls.

In real life, for example in our cities, there are no such limitations to the growth of density. Instead of getting slower and slower, there is proof for the fact that our cities speed up with increasing size and density, the more people find their way into them.⁸ As this density is not achievable in Second Life in the current configuration, large tracts of the simulated space look magically empty, like the above-mentioned utopias or the scenes in *Last Year in Marienbad* in the essay by Stephan Doesinger.

Even clearer is the difference from real life in Second Life's frame of reference if you look at the underlying conventions against a background of other representational spaces. Before Steffen Krämer goes further into the relationship between Second Life and well-known utopias, we shall therefore take a closer look at a number of important definitions of the convention – the space as a grid and the addressability of the prims as building blocks of the world.

Le Corbusier, *Vers un architecture*, Paris 1923. The modern architect identifies geometric primary bodies as the foundation of Roman Architecture in an ideal view of the ancient city.



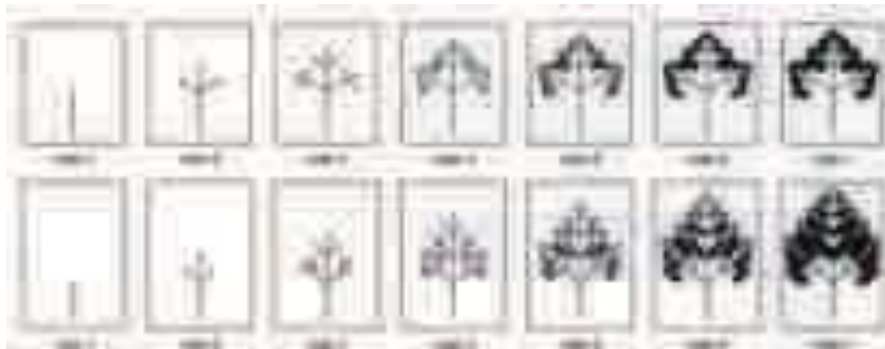
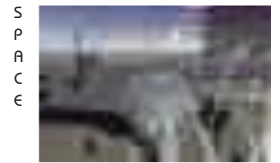
Albrecht Dürer, *Nude Figure Design*, c. 1506, Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Dresden. Geometry can be used to idealise the proportions of a body. Deviation from the rule brings the figure to life. Numbers enable us to find the figure among similar ones.

To define the space as a grid, i.e. a three-dimensional system of coordinates, it is important to note that this is an invention that is not as universal as it may seem in the age of GPS and Google Earth. In the western tradition, the roots of the idea of space as a grid go back at least to the fifteenth century, and are closely connected with the development of central perspective and other representational techniques.

As in Second Life, the various notations of three-dimensional grids are the result of a convention in the real world as well. In both cases, the convention allows us to refer to space beyond the boundaries of what is immediately visible. In David Summer's term, it defines a meta-optical space that can be depicted with geometrical precision.⁹ The difference between the convention in Second Life compared with reality is that the latter exists without an imaginary system of coordinates. Second Life consists of the grid. Without the grid, it loses its basis.

If we compare the grid of Second Life with a classical Roman town plan, the consequences of this limitation become clear. Second Life is trapped within the walls of its own convention

like an orthogonally arranged city. Everything that exists in Second Life must be oriented to the infrastructure of the sims. Large structures such as a theatre can embrace several units of area (i.e. sims or “insulae”) but always remain convention-bound within the walls. It remains to be seen whether the publishers of Second Life are able to tear down these walls. Undoubtedly there will be conventions by third parties that will possibly allow freer handling of space, as in the case of the expansion of our classical city.¹⁰



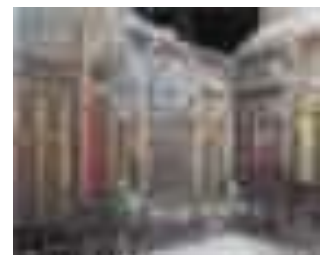
Stephen Wolfram, *A New Kind of Science*, Champaign/IL, 2001:
The complex growth of plants depends on very few variables. A tiny difference in one of those variables, like the branching angle, results in a totally different phenotype.

Among the pre-defined ‘prims’ in Second Life are on the one hand simple basic geometrical bodies such as cubes, cylinders, prisms or spheres, but other much more complex objects are also defined as basic shapes – i.e. “avatars”, which are constructed from a network of triangles, and “plants”, which are basically different from all other forms, but still relatively simply defined by a set of variables.¹¹ Every object in Second Life that is made up of one or more such prims is allocated a unique 16-byte character string in order to make it addressable.¹² This convention enables all components of Second Life to be kept perfectly discrete. Any fluid continuity is an illusion of projection. This is in stark contrast to our real world, which is conceivable as both discrete and continuous, and where the subdivision into objects is generally ambivalent and subjective.¹³

Ultimately, in its present form Second Life is not a world of its own but only another conventional form of representation just like for example 19th-century landscape painting¹⁴ or any other form of art. Avatars are constructed like Dürer’s Venus, architecture can be assembled of geometric bodies like Roman architecture in the eyes of Le Corbusier, and we can move in it like the inhabitants of the Villa dei Misteri in Pompeii or the dolls in a Neapolitan crib.

Regardless of which way Second Life or its successors develop, unlike reality we shall always realise that it is a simulation.¹⁵ If we fail to recognise that distinction, the simulation simply becomes reality.

As a representational convention Second Life is a subject of art research, just as valid as any other. However, the jury’s decision concerning the architectural composition has already shown that the familiar categories of real architecture such as high-rise building or residential building in Second Life make no sense. As relevant categories emerge and cannot be defined in a simple way, the study of architecture has to join hands with the science of complexity (again).¹⁶



Neapolitan nativity scene, Bavarian National Museum collection, Munich. Three-dimensional parallel worlds look back on a long tradition here.
The relevant market place is in the Via San Gregorio Armeno in Naples. Whereas many only play at trading in the Nativity, a few people can actually make a living from it.

Including Room 16, Villa dei Misteri, Pompeii. In the 1st century AD, artificial architecture extended reality in the Villa dei Misteri.



Archigram: collage, gallery project for Bournemouth, 1968, Archigram/Ron Herron.

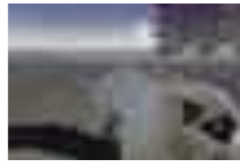
Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Tausend Plateaus*, Berlin 1992, S. 668:

*"You can live wedged into deserts,
steppes or oceans;
you can even live fluidly in cities,
and be an urban nomad."*

Throughout the ages, there have been other document conventions representing Utopias:
There are endless shopping opportunities for your
personal version of Utopia!



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A man snowboards with a "snowboard simulator" in Sello Shopping Center, Espoo, Finland, 2007



Title page woodcut
from Sir Thomas
More's *Utopia*,
1516. The drawing
illustrates More's
idea of localizing
his ideal state on
an island over the
horizon in some part
of the New World.

No Place like Utopia

by Steffen Krämer

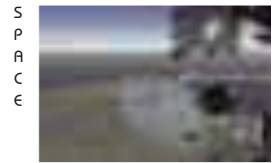
Analogies are constantly being drawn – indeed, in this book as well – between Second Life and concepts of Utopia, which have existed since classical antiquity and acquired a specific meaning during the Renaissance. The word Utopia combines the two Greek words “ou”, for non-, and “topos”, for place.¹⁷ Therefore strictly speaking, it signifies a non-place or a nowhere. Whereas this meaning is hard to grasp, it points to the title of a literary text published in 1516 and written by the English jurist and lord chancellor Thomas More.¹⁸ In his novel More describes the model of an ideal state and refers to the location, in which it's society had developed historically and supposedly still existed in the sixteenth century. The location is named Utopia. According to More's idea, Utopia was an island in the sea beyond the horizon, located somewhere in the New World close to an unspecified coast. As a consequence More's *Utopia* became a symbol for unexplored territory in the Age of Discovery, shortly after Christopher Columbus found the Americas at the end of the fifteenth century.

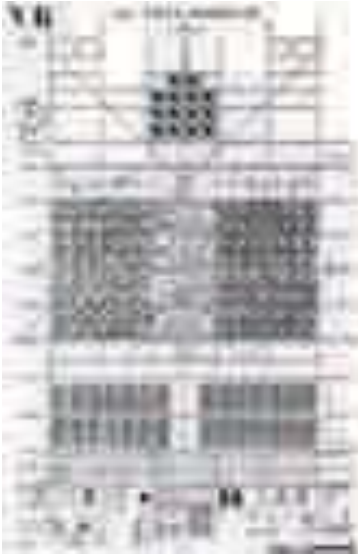
As a setting for the development of an ideal state, the distant island was perfect, since it would be completely free of the millennia-old chains of ancient European traditions. On an island where Europeans had never set foot, alternative notions of the state or city could have developed in a natural way, so that More's *Utopia* was conceived not so much as a nowhere-land as an as-yet unknown place somewhere, which is only nowhere yet in this world.

Later exponents of Utopian novels would also borrow the Morean idea of an island for their works. One example is Sir Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* of 1627, which places its island with an ideal state somewhere in the Pacific.¹⁹ By the beginning of the twentieth century such still undiscovered islands that could serve as a topographical reference point for an Utopian state were of course no longer available. Authors therefore had to cast around for new autonomous locations. Written in 1907 and published in 1929, Russian writer Alexander Bogdanow's novel *Red Planet* set his vision of a state on the planet Mars.²⁰ Utopia was thus now an as-yet undiscovered space-island in the solar system.

Political or social visionary worlds in the cosmos with extra-terrestrial ideal states were thereafter a firm part of the established repertory of sci-fi literature. However, since the 1980s, they have become a rather antiquated notion, since the computer-generated world of artificial reality offers the infinite facets of “islands in the net”, such as American writer Bruce Sterling described in his cyberpunk novel of that title of 1988.²¹ Thus More's *Utopia* can now develop within the boundless expanses of cyberspace.²² The current paradigm of an island with an ideal urban community in virtual reality is Second Life.

The urban arrangement of this 3D online world is based on the grid, i.e. a three-dimensional grid-space, which is subdivided into individual square “sims” each with an identical area. Thus what distinguishes the grid of Second Life is a rigorously orthogonal geometricisation. Though the structure given at the beginning can be expanded, it cannot be changed. This regular diagram is uniform in shape and permanent, and therefore claims timeless validity. And precisely this concept of perfect harmony plus absolute immutability also characterises the shape of the cities in More's *Utopia*.²³ There are fifty-four of them in all on More's island,





Le Corbusier: Ville Radieuse, early 1930s. An ideal city layout whose urban structure can be expanded at the sides but not basically changed. The arrangement corresponds to a functional hierarchy.



Ludwig Hilberseimer: high-rise city, 1924. Anonymous figures indicated as dark silhouettes inhabit this anonymous urban vision. The artistic neutrality results almost inevitably in a loss of urban quality and individuality.

all with the identical urban structure, a square ground plan divided into four uniform districts and all buildings are the same distance from each other.

Utopian communities absolutely cry out for an ideal urban model, since they are held together in a perfect collective state that can tolerate change no more than it can imperfection. The city is thus the symbol of these communities, regardless of whether those of Utopia, New Atlantis or Second Life.

Meantime, what fundamentally distinguishes the Utopia of Second Life from its Renaissance and Baroque predecessors is the social structure of the ideal society. More and Bacon wrote their Utopian works seeking to combine their opposition to aspects of the set-up in their day with a quest for a better social order. In their view, Utopia would strive primarily for political or social perfection. Idealistic threads of this kind do not occur in Second Life. Though every user tries to perfect his virtual counterpart – the avatar – in its external appearance in accordance with his personal preferences, no intention of consolidating an urban collective is involved. On the contrary, an interesting and attractive external appearance increases the individual's chances of asserting his or her claims in the virtual beauty competition.

Moreover, “there is in Second Life no more popular activity than shopping”, as explicitly stated in the official handbook to the virtual world.²⁴ This urban Utopia is thus clearly based on a simple consumer ideology, which is in addition permanently being optimised. In Second Life, profit rules, and the so-called land barons determine the distribution of urban land by trading in the virtual building land.²⁵ Not surprisingly, Anshe Chung – currently the richest resident of Second Life – is a real-estate dealer who has built a trading empire step by step from the sale of virtual property.²⁶ It is not the Utopia of an ideal society that dominates here but the real currency of hard US dollars.

This ultimately capitalist notion is however not entirely foreign to the historical development of Utopian urban models. The famous *ville radieuse* – radiant city – designed by Swiss architect Le Corbusier in the early 1930s is an urban vision likewise based on mercantile principles. The upper area, as it were the intellectual head of the whole urban area, is a mighty administration and business centre containing a total of fourteen huge office buildings in which an almost boundless mass of employees has to represent the values of a modern business world unconditionally. Like the city in Second Life, the *ville radieuse* is subdivided into geometrical plots, and again, this regular arrangement can be expanded laterally but not changed fundamentally. In contrast, Ludwig Hilberseimer's high-rise city of 1924 visualises indistinguishable rows of buildings in which the anonymous office-workers have to live. Loosely dispersed throughout the perspective representation of urban space their dark, stereotype figures are reminiscent of the avatars in Second Life. Though the latter are more colourful and more innovative, they look just as artificial. The urban scene in Hilberseimer's vertical city seems just as thinly populated as Second Life.

And finally, Second Life offers the countless facets of artificial backdrops in the various virtual urban areas. Sometimes they can be as obscure as Terry Gilliam's dystopian sci-fi vision in the film *Brazil*, which came out programmatically in 1984; sometimes they can be as happy and naïve as the architectonic scenery of Disneyland. Yet despite this at-first-glance astonishing richness of imaginative design, a quality of diagrammatic regularity always remains present in Second Life. No doubt this is due to the fact that every object, however complex, is constructed from a very limited stock of primary geometric shapes. These shapes



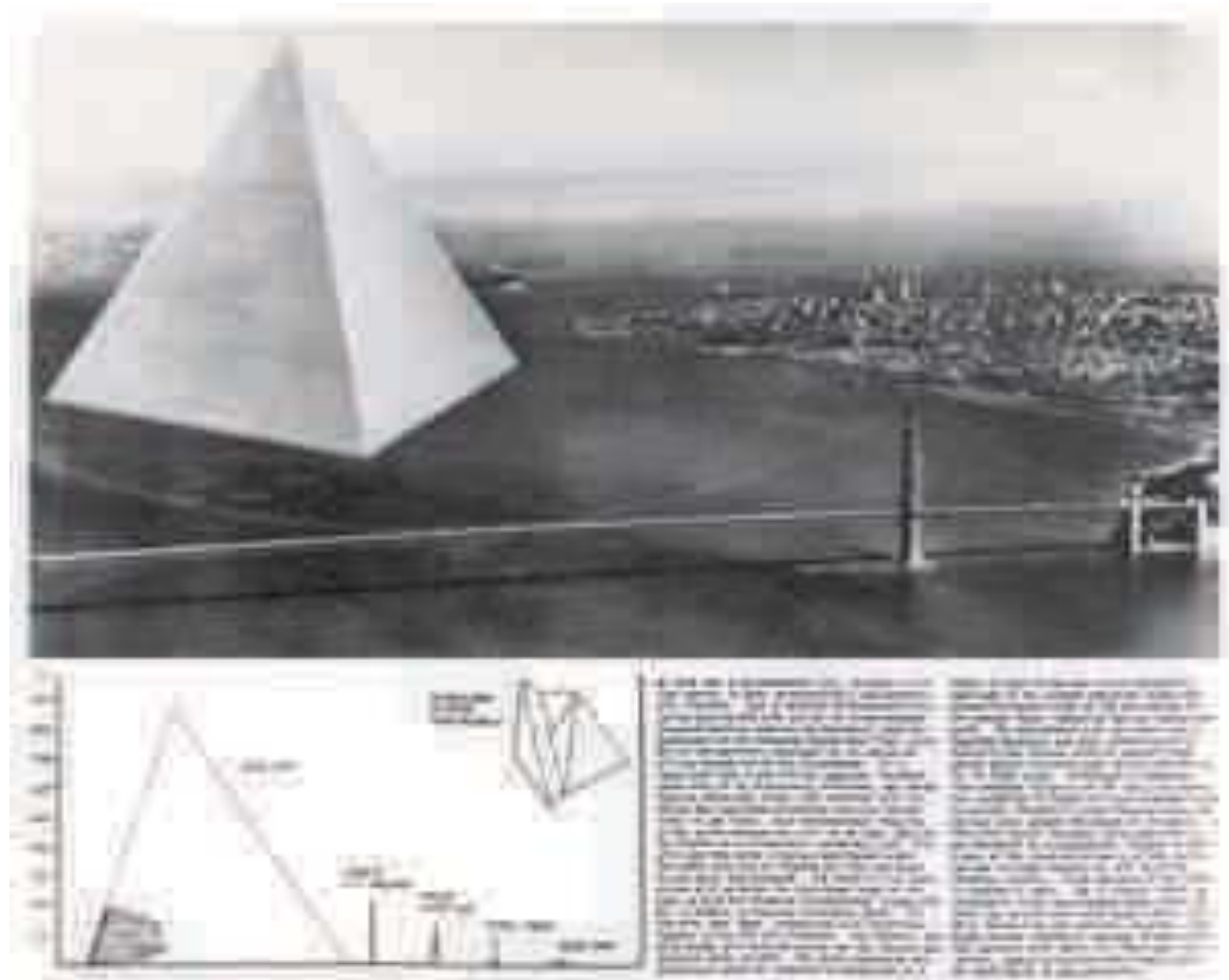
Still from *Brazil*, UK 1984. George Orwell says in 1984:
 “The reality was decaying, dingy cities
 where underfed people shuffled to
 and fro in leaky shoes.”



Utopia, an island in the sea...



Disneyland near
 Los Angeles,
 from the 1950s.
 Breezy backdrops
 from the
 lowlands of trivial
 architecture,
 which attempt
 to satisfy the
 sentimental
 desire for dream
 fantasies in fairy-
 tale glamour.



R. Buckminster Fuller. Three Utopian Projects: Tetrahedron City, late 1960s. The artificial island floats in San Francisco Bay atop Alcatraz, the high-security prison island from which nobody could escape.

form a monolithic dataset, in which every distinct bit is identified by a 16-byte character string. Just like with *The Matrix* in the 1999 sci-fi film by Larry and Andy Wachowski, it is hard to translate this dataset of endless alphabetical and digital codes into realistic virtual imagery. As a consequence we are still left with an abstract impression of cybernetic illusion. Second Life is definitely not as alive as reality.

There is nonetheless a complex urban vision to Second Life, and currently millions of people immerse themselves into it regularly. Yet it does not attain the degree of collective perfection, on a political, social or cultural level, that Thomas More attributed to his classic model in the early sixteenth century. So it is quite in order to borrow a phrase from that well-known doyen of American architectural criticism Peter Blake, who named his late-twentieth century personal memoirs *No Place like Utopia*.²⁷



Morpheus: “*The matrix is omnipresent. It surrounds us, you can feel it. ... It is an illusionary world you foster so as to keep at bay the truth that you are a slave.*”

QUOTED FROM THE FILM “MATRIX”, USA 1999

ENDNOTES:

- 1 GOMBRICH 1979, p. 210; ON THE EYE AS A HIEROGLYPH FOR GOD SEE BREDEKAMP 1994, esp. p. 298, FIG. 3; ON CORBUSIER’S OPEN HAND SEE AMONG OTHERS LE CORBUSIER 1960, p. 278, AND LE CORBUSIER JEANNERET 1957–65, VOL. 7, p. 109, BOTTOM RIGHT.
- 2 SEE SL HANDBOOK 2007, p. V; FOR THE MORALLY MOTIVATED RESEARCHER IT MIGHT BE ADDED, THAT MAJOR PARTS OF THE HISTORY OF ART NEED TO BE EXCLUDED IF WE CONSIDER OUR SUBJECTS ACCORDING TO THE MORAL INTEGRITY OF THEIR PROTAGONISTS.
- 3 OTHER EXAMPLES OF SUCH 3D SPACES INCLUDE THERE, WORLD OF WAR CRAFT AND IN SOME RESPECTS ALSO GOOGLE EARTH; IMPORTANT TERMS IN THIS CIRCUMSTANCE ARE “METAVERSE” AND “MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME”. SEE THE CORRESPONDING WIKIPEDIA ENTRIES FOR EACH.
- 4 ON LOCAL ACTIVITY AS A FOUNDATION OF COMPLEXITY SEE CHUA 2005; ON COMPLEXITY IN GENERAL SEE ÉRDI 2008.
- 5 SEE FOR EXAMPLE ECONOMIST 2007 ON THE NECESSARY REGULATION OF THE SECOND LIFE MONETARY MARKET.
- 6 INTERESTINGLY THE OFFICIAL DOCUMENTATION OF THE INFRASTRUCTURE (SEE [HTTP://SECONDLIFEGRID.NET](http://secondlifegrid.net)) DOES NOT STATE, IF “SECOND LIFE GRID” MEANS THE REPRESENTED SPACE GRID OR A GRID OF SERVERS IN THE SENSE OF GRID-COMPUTING. IN FACT THE INFRASTRUCTURE CONSISTS OF A LOCAL GROUP OF COMPUTERS WHICH ARE NOT DISTRIBUTED ARBITRARILY; SEE IN DETAIL WIKIPEDIA ENTRIES FOR “COMPUTER CLUSTER” AND “GRID COMPUTING”.
- 7 FOR AN INTRODUCTION ON THE SL GRID, SIMS, PRIMS AND AVATARS SEE SL HANDBOOK 2007 PP. 10, 12, 132FF AND 146–148.
- 8 SEE BETTENCOURT, ET AL 2007.
- 9 FOR THE DEFINITION OF METAOPTICAL SEE SUMMERS 2003, p. 555FF AND p. 685; ON THE ORIGINS OF OUR MODERN NOTION OF GRID-SPACE SEE PEHNT 1983.
- 10 AN IMPORTANT STEP HEREBY WOULD BE THE DECOUPLING OF THE INFRASTRUCTURE FROM THE SPACE GRID, FOR E.G. WITH A DISTRIBUTED COMPUTING-GRID, WHERE MULTIPLE COMPUTERS ADD TO THE DENSITY OF A SINGLE SQUARE OF AREA; SEE WIKIPEDIA ENTRY FOR “GRID COMPUTING”.
- 11 SEE SL HANDBOOK 2007 p. 132FF; FOR THE NOTATION OF PLANTS SEE SECOND LIFE WIKI ENTRY “CUSTOM LINDEN PLANTS”.
- 12 ON “UNIVERSAL UNIQUE IDENTIFIERS” (UUID) SEE SL HANDBOOK 2007, p. 9.
- 13 THE SUBJECTIVITY OF DIVISION OF REAL OBJECTS AND PROBLEMS COMING WITH IT BECOME EVIDENT BY COMPARING HIERARCHICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF HISTORIC MONUMENTS AND DOCUMENTS; SEE SCHICH 2007 PP. 34–46.
- 14 THE OBSERVATIONS ON JOHN CONSTABLE’S PAINTING OF WIVENHOE PARK IN GOMBRICH 1960 SEEM RELEVANT IN THIS CIRCUMSTANCE.
- 15 RECOGNIZING THE DIFFERENCE IS LEARNABLE: SEE ELKINS 2000, PP. 108–117.
- 16 THE STUDY OF ARCHITECTURE AND NETWORKS AS COMPLEX PHENOMENA JOINED A LONG TIME AGO: SEE WIGLEY 2001; FOR A HISTORY OF SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS SEE FREEMAN 2004; ON COMPLEX NETWORKS IN GENERAL SEE BARBÁSI 2002.
- 17 ON THE ETYMOLOGIC ROOTS OF THE WORD UTOPIA SEE SAAGE 1991, p. 2.
- 18 THOMAS MORE’S NOVEL UTOPIA OF 1516 IS REPRINTED IN: DER UTOPISCHE STAAT 1960, PP. 7–110. ALL RELEVANT INFORMATION IS TAKEN FROM THIS GERMAN TRANSLATION.
- 19 FRANCIS BACON’S NEW ATLANTIS OF 1627 IS REPRINTED IN GERMAN TRANSLATION IN: DER UTOPISCHE STAAT 1960, PP. 171–215.
- 20 BOGDANOV 1989, PP. 5–154.
- 21 STERLING 1988.
- 22 THE TERM CYBERSPACE FOR A COMPUTER-SIMULATED ARTIFICIAL REALITY WAS COINED BY THE AMERICAN AUTHOR WILLIAM GIBSON IN HIS 1984 NOVEL NEUROMANCER; SEE GIBSON 2005, p. 87.
- 23 ON THE CONFIGURATION OF CITIES IN THOMAS MORE’S UTOPIA SEE DER UTOPISCHE STAAT 1960, PP. 49–53 AND 59FF.
- 24 SL HANDBOOK 2007, p. 63.
- 25 FOR LAND BARONS AND VIRTUAL LAND IN SECOND LIFE SEE SL HANDBOOK 2007 PP. 37–39, 283, AND MÜLLER 2007, p. 154.
- 26 ON ANSHE CHUNG SEE SL HANDBOOK 2007, p. 214 AND 251, AND SPIEGEL 2007, p. 151, 153.
- 27 BLAKE 1996.

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