This is a beautiful book with stunning illustrations – 300 in all, 250 of which are in colour. It traces the history of images of the ideal city from the biblical New Jerusalem and Classical sources, through to the Megastructuralists and Situationists of the 1960s and '70s. It is explicitly confined to Western images. Although the end papers reproduce a glorious sixteenth-century map of Tenochtitlan and the Gulf of Mexico, this Aztec capital was substantially destroyed by European invaders. The new Mexico City was built on the existing grid pattern – a recurring feature of American city plans – but the colonisers razed the Aztec monuments and filled in the canals with the resulting rubble. Eaton takes us through fictional accounts of ideal cities from Atlantis to Bellamy’s Boston; the architecture of utopian communities (though principally in fact model industrial estates such as Saltaire); the functionalist aspirations of Le Corbusier; the garden city plans of Ebenezer Howard and Frank Lloyd Wright; Bauhaus; Futurism; and the explosion of utopian imagining of the Russian avant-garde in the 1920s. Here, as elsewhere, we are treated not just to the relatively well-known juxtaposition of Malevich’s Suprematism and Tatlin’s Constructivism, but to tantalising less familiar material. Eaton suggests that ‘the absence of any clear model in Marx’s writings regarding the form the communist built environment would take obviously left plenty of room for invention’. This isn’t an adequate explanation for the upsurge of extraordinary creativity in the pre-Stalin era, but the resultant contrast between urbanist (modernist) and disurbanist (linear or garden city) responses was new to me. So too was the competition, launched in 1929, for a plan for a Green City for 100,000 inhabitants outside Moscow. It is, surely, the mark of the success of a book such as this that it leaves you wanting to know more.

The historical scope of this book is wide. Its geographical range is limited by being confined to broadly Western visions, although extended by their colonial application (not only in the Americas, but, for example in Corbusier’s Chandigarh). It is eclectic as to form, using literature and art as well as implemented and unimplemented overtly architectural plans. The risk in such a collection is two-fold. One is that the sheer range of material means that depth of understanding of individual cases is sacrificed; the other is that an overall coherence of argument is hard to sustain. Eaton is not completely successful on either count. Her interpretation of Morris’s review of Bellamy’s Looking Backward as ‘condescending’ to Bellamy, and ‘cynical’ about utopianism in general is contentious. This would be trivial if it did not point to a more general weakness in the treatment of utopianism. This partly concerns the apologetic tone around the utopian enterprise itself, which is throughout seen as implicitly dystopian/totalitarian, and partly concerns a related failure to embed the discussion of the spatial imaginary in a history of the social imaginary.

Contemporary scholarship over the last three decades or so has moved way from the assumption that the utopian imaginary is concerned with the production of blueprints. Rather, it is now seen as the construction of a virtual space for the exploration of (im)possibility and the education of desire. Architectural utopias
may appear to be closer to the blueprint than other forms, but Eaton does draw on literature and art as well. In her conclusion, she says that the problem with the ideal city has been the tendency to treat it as a mastery of nature, to require a tabula rasa, to straighten the rivers. Now it may be that rigidity and megalomania are characteristic of some of these plans. But Ebenezer Howard, for example, always said that his geometric designs were diagrams which would have, in practice, to be adapted to the topography of particular place (as in fact happened at Letchworth). Yet perfection is as often a quality imputed to utopian visions by their opponents as a claim made by utopians themselves. Louis Marin has described utopics as ‘spatial play’, but there is no sense that any of these images are presented other than in the deadliest of earnest. How, then, might one account for Lloyd Wright’s mile-high sky-scraper? Did Tatlin know that his tower was unbuildable, and did he care?

Moreover, the dystopian effects attributed to utopian excesses may equally occur without the utopian moment. Later visionaries in some cases, as Eaton demonstrates, insist on flexibility: the Futurists suggested that every generation should tear down its cities and build its own. But, as David Harvey has recently argued in Spaces of Hope (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), capitalism is a social system which, driven by profit, relentlessly tears down and rebuilds the infrastructure of cities. The question of the social determination of spatial forms and the spatial determination of social processes is crucial in a discussion of the ideal city, because utopianism is above all a holistic enterprise – a kind of speculative sociology. The intended transformation of social and economic relations, and the mediation of these through their spatial instantiation, needs to be given greater centrality if we are fully to appreciate the implications of utopian architecture. This, I think, would run against Eaton’s conclusion that utopians need to moderate their ambition and think on a more local scale. Indeed, the greatest weakness of some contemporary writing about the sustainable city is precisely that it stops short of questioning whether we can design our way out of the dystopia of global capitalism. Here, I must say, Eaton sells Morris short: for he, above all, understood that the reform of our cities was possible only on the basis of a root and branch transformation of our whole way of life.

Nevertheless, this is a lovely book. If it is more of an extended catalogue than a theoretical treatise, Eaton’s commentary is clear, readable, lucid, and informative. It provides a resource which can be used by other scholars to broaden and deepen our knowledge of the utopian imaginary, and by all of us to think about the kind of cities in which we want to live.

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