

Island Life: The Eco-Imaginary Of Capitalism

The imaginary of capitalism is fully stocked with visions of hope. Projects promising to sustain the unsustainable, at least for the few, picture lifestyles of leisurely consumerism and fashionable recreation. Rendering ghosts sampling street food and shopping at market stalls. Joggers and canoeists copy-pasted into ecologically redemptive scenarios, reiterations of riparian landscapes, and greened urban environments, where the architecture is barely discernible through lush foliage, gauzy atmospherics, and simulated lens flare.¹

1. For an incisive account of the atmospherics of the eco-city, see Ross Exo Adams, "Longing for a greener present: Neoliberalism and the eco-city," *Radical Philosophy* 163 (September/October 2010).
2. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 266.

We needn't add any further to the surplus of imagined sustainable futures. The whole project on which this line of production is premised is, in any case, dubious, founded on the misapprehension that capitalism is willing and able to apply the brakes on the rapidly unfolding environmental catastrophe set in motion by its own systemic logic. From the Marxian perspective offered by Ellen Meiksins Wood, capitalism's "ecological vandalism is not an index of failure but a token of success, the inevitable by-product of a system whose constitutive principle is the subordination of all human values to the imperatives of accumulation and the requirement of profitability."² Entertaining this perspective, suspending the process of solutionism to which architecture is so fondly attached, we can better grasp the problematics of sustainability. These bear on the relations between social and spatial orders posited in the notion of a carbon form (even if the analysis of these also casts doubt on this formulation), and can be discerned from analyzing the existing stock of capitalism's eco-imaginary; its projections approached as an index of the poverty of this imaginary, running out of space, time, and ideas.

Robinsonades

The most absolute form in which the eco-imaginary of capitalism can exist is that of the island. Here, this imaginary can play out in contemporary fashion its longstanding fantasies of individual autonomy, tales of free economic subjects recreating civil society through their own ingenuity. *Robinson Crusoe*,

3. See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume 19*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 169–70; Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), 83.

4. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 84.

5. Ibid. Emphasis original.

as Marx observed, is the archetype of this fantasy.³ Daniel Defoe's protagonist, shipwrecked and returned to a state of nature, proceeds to reproduce in microcosm the bourgeois lifeworld of his era. Some commodities he salvages from his ship, others are fashioned from what he finds in the environment, now grasped as a resource to be worked, made instrumental. From his encounters with the indigenous population he takes a servant, teaches him to speak English, and converts him to Christianity. He keeps account of everything, recording income and expenditure in his ledger.

For Marx, *Robinson Crusoe* is emblematic of the fantastical form through which capitalism imagines itself as both product and guarantor of the individual autonomous subject. Rather than loosening the bonds of feudalism so as to free the individual from social ties, capitalism, as Marx notes, is in fact founded on the intensification of forms of social interdependence, including those of labor, trade, and communication. These relations must, however, remain obscure so that its fantasies of possessive individualism are maintained. As Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*, "The epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social (from this standpoint, general) relations."⁴ The standpoint of the individual is, for Marx, an effect of capitalism rather than the source of its achievements. "The human being," he continues, "is in the most literal sense a ζῷον πολιτικόν [zoon politikon, or political animal], not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society. Production by an isolated individual outside society . . . is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living *together* and talking to each other."⁵

Capitalism is now pressed to append and incorporate an unfolding ecological crisis into its foundational fantasies. It does so, however, without being able to alter the terms of its imaginary: one in which the individual occupies the center of the picture, with relations of interdependence pushed out of sight, beyond its frame of reference. In the eco-imaginary of capitalism, the issue of impending ecological crisis is answered by casting individuals back into a state of nature. The problem is translated into one of reinserting the subject into its supposedly natural environment; a project of reconnection and redemption in which individuals, alone or gathered in small groups – notably never allowed to amount to anything like a collective entity – are figured enjoying the immediate sensory experience of nature. The renderings of sustainable futures

through which the eco-imaginary of capitalism projects visions of hope are populated by characters foraging and harvesting, engaging in simple forms of trade, taking respite from the sun under the shade provided by trees, strolling along boardwalks suspended over wetlands. Ecological crisis, too abstract to afford easy pictorial representation, too much the product of complex interrelations and interactions seemingly beyond the means of individuals to comprehend or address, is naturalized, reworked into the infantile projection of a ubiquitous greening of space for personal enjoyment. Technology also makes an appearance in these otherwise Rousseauian scenarios, though only as the benevolent counterpart to nature, as a service provider for the needs of the individual, rather than as a systemic force or infrastructural operation. The part technology might play in actively forming the subject it appears merely to serve, like that of its role in relation to conditions of ecological crisis, is rendered obscure.

Responsibility for the environment is individualized in appeals issued to our economic agency. Consume, but conscientiously. Any feeling of sacrifice is more than offset by the reward of playing one's part as an ethical consumer. The corporations promising to act as planetary caretakers, while also striving to deliver on economic growth and prosperity, are responsible for the greater part of environmental damage. A mere 100 companies, according to the *CDP Carbon Majors Report* released in 2017, are responsible for more than 70 percent of global carbon emissions.⁶ Those who, in Marx's words, bear and personify capital's most intense concentrations draw public funding into the financing of their personal ventures.⁷ Figures like Jeff Bezos are able to maintain the flow of capital toward their own investments by bypassing the systems of taxation through which at least some portion of their vast wealth might otherwise be socialized, invested in, say, public projects for sustainable urban infrastructure. At liberty to deploy their capital to fund individual pitches at planetary redemption, they cast themselves as lone visionaries and saviors.

Individualizing responsibilities and solutions draws focus from the interdependencies – social, political, economic, technological, biological, and geological – through which capitalism is reproduced. As in the Robinsonades of an earlier era, the eco-imaginary of capitalism works to occlude the fact that these relations subtend the very possibility of individuation as such and that any meaningful response to our ecological crises demands their urgent reconfiguration. Still, in projects such as Bezos's Blue Origin or Elon Musk's SpaceX, it

6. Paul Griffin, *CDP Carbon Majors Report 2017* (London: CDP Worldwide, July 2017).

7. Marx, *Capital*, 254.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Land of Cockaigne*, 1567. Oil on panel. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.



is not so difficult to discern through the sci-fi dazzle a theatrical mechanism operating at the upper registers of credibility. Schemes for off-world colonization are barely believable as anything but escape hatches for the extremely wealthy few. Like the pencil skyscrapers rising above Manhattan, these projects speak of individuated forms of departure from the increasingly desperate situation on the ground. However much they may be dressed up in the language of the pioneer spirit, the notion that a frontier is being advanced for anyone but the superrich is obviously fanciful.

Capitalism has, of course, a long-standing record in reserving certain spaces exclusively for the rich. The spatial order it determines for everyone else, from its agricultural origins onward, is one of displacement and enclosure. Its ascension in the late 18th century paralleled, as the historian Peter Linebaugh notes, the same period in which “the archipelago of prisons began to overspread the world, and when the death ships (Middle Passage) and the death camps (plantations) became the engines of accumulation.”⁸ While the enslaved and the working classes are subjected to the most extreme forms of environmental degradation, governed by the harshest of penal codes, disciplined by the strictest management of factory labor, the owner class situates itself in landscaped gardens. As Ernst Bloch observes in *The Principle of Hope*, in the 16th century, Pieter Bruegel could paint *The Land of Cockaigne* – the land of liberty, licentiousness, and plenty – “exactly as the poor folk always dreamed it to be. As an eternal Sunday, which is one because there is no sign of any treadmill, and nothing beyond what can be drunk, eaten boiled or roasted is to be found.” By the 19th century, such scenes of epicurean happiness could only be imagined by and for the few, secluded from the labor of others in their own pastoral

8. Peter Linebaugh, *Red Round Globe Hot Burning: A Tale at the Crossroads of Commons and Closure, of Love and Terror, of Race and Class, and of Kate and Ned Despard* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 7.

Édouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



9. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume Two*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 813.

settings, as exemplified in Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*.⁹

The forms and imagery mobilized in contemporary scenarios of seclusion speak as much of desperation as they do the pleasures of the pastoral. Set in scenes of worldly remove, they offer up zones of securitization from a global condition perhaps now beyond redemption. Whatever the luxuries they have to offer, their ultimate appeal surely lies in the promise of survival in a condition evidently on the brink of unprecedented mass upheavals and extinction. This is how the eco-imaginary of capitalism conceives of the future. It can no longer credibly hold out the promise of universal progress. Its spatiopolitical aesthetics are those of immunization and escape. The island is this imaginary's privileged form. Among its current iterations is Oceanix City, an archipelago-formed metropolis designed by Bjarke Ingels Group for the Oceanix company as part of a UN-Habitat initiative also involving the MIT Center for Ocean Engineering and the US-based Explorers Club. In this project we can see the mechanics of the eco-imaginary at full tilt, attempting to assuage the fear of catastrophe, reckoning with the conflictual temporalities of crisis and continuity, situating the individual subject in immediate and redemptive contact with nature, keeping complexities out of the picture.

Oceanix City

Oceanix is designed to appear an imminently achievable prospect, its near-future eco-utopia framed in the pervasively familiar rhetoric of service provision. In the bird's-eye rendering, the hexagonal islands tessellate into an arrangement calling to mind the apps arrayed on the screen of an Apple Watch. Each island assigned a function, the citizens of the archipelago are invited to navigate through the available



Above and opposite page: Bjarke Ingels Group, Oceanix City, 2019. Drawings courtesy the architect.

10. Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 18.

11. Adams, "Longing for a greener present," 6.

options and, as with any smart technology, curate their personal lifestyle in the process.

The inhabitant of Oceanix is also to be served by a range of personal vehicles: drones joining the paragliders in the sky, waterborne craft sharing the sea with windsurfers. Styled in contemporary consumer minimalism, these vehicles recall modes of individualized transportation seen hovering above Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City. Situating the subject in an individuated relation to the city, these configurations harken back to 19th-century visions of the urban, described by geographer Matthew Gandy as "Olmstedian conceptions of social and ecological order."¹⁰ This order is predicated on the obfuscation of the collective and interdependent means through which our relationship with nature is mediated. The eco-imaginary of capitalism is incapable of imagining social relations, or those between society and nature, outside the terms of sovereign and possessive individualism.

As Ross Exo Adams has argued, "The eco-city is nothing more than the product of the centuries-old programme of liberal urbanism whose novelty now includes infrastructural strategies for the distribution of nature."¹¹ For Adams, the eco-city reveals itself to be trapped in a kind of temporal paralysis, a nostalgia for the present, for which the lingering influence of liberal and physiocratic thought is ultimately responsible. While such legacies no doubt play into the incapacity of the eco-city to imagine a future beyond its existing, and nostalgic, frames of reference, this incapacity cannot be ascribed to the ideas of liberalism or its antecedents alone. The historical and ongoing social relations constitutive of capitalism dictate its inability to imagine any world for which the isolated individual is not its central point of reference. The collective, alongside forms of mutuality and solidarity, cannot be admitted to its visions of the future without threatening its essential apparatus of exploitation, profit, and accumulation. There can be no *Land of Cockaigne* in capitalism. The capitalist imagination cannot conceive of a freely accessible, collective enjoyment of nature or an unproductive disposition toward the world. The commons whose joys are celebrated in Breugel's painting were expropriated in order to furnish capitalism with its instruments of accumulation. Crisis cannot be permitted to open the door to the return of these commons, with their unearned and idle luxuries. Instead, as at Oceanix, a spatial and technological fix is deployed; capitalism is kept afloat by a platform urbanism relieved of earthly concerns, floating above the crisis.



Likewise, labor cannot be allowed to intrude into the self-sufficient, urban-ecological harmony at Oceanix. The workers at the factories making the vehicles its inhabitants drive, or constructing the islands they are floating on, or sorting the goods being flown in by delivery drones, are absent from the promotional imagery. The server farms hosting the islands' data usage are nowhere to be seen. Social interdependencies, and the relations of exploitation these are premised on, cannot be factored into the picture without threatening to undermine the fantasy of autonomous island life. Labor can only appear in its most archaic and naturalized forms: gardening or going to the market – precisely the immediate forms of social reproduction that capitalism sought to eliminate from its inception through the imposition of wage labor. The renderings of life on Oceanix never quite succeed, though, in eradicating the appearance of class relations. While, according to the project's website, the residents of its neighborhoods are supposed to occupy a “mixed-use space for living, working and gathering,” some are evidently doing the living while others the working and the gathering. Placed in proximity, the differential status of the individuals and families strolling the walkways from those they pass by without noticing, weighed down carrying goods or bent over working the ground, is all too obvious. The figures cast from image banks as the Oceanix inhabitants fail to convince as equal representatives of a live-work-gather continuum. Instead, the renderings inadvertently depict scenes of indifference to exploitation and inequality.

As an image of the future, Oceanix is equally unconvincing. Compelled to address the dual conditions of progress and crisis,

capitalism now resorts to its long-standing and generic scenography of the techno-pastoral. Unable to undertake what is required to pull us back from the brink of catastrophe, the eco-imaginary offers up palliatives in the form of designs for sustainable futures, attempting to obfuscate the contradictions of our moment. It projects a continuity within the limited realms of the island – its last resort. Even reduced to these measures, capitalism's limited repertoire appears played out.

Formalities

The notion that spatial forms and orders correspond to those of energy sources, as in carbon form, may be an appealing one, especially for architects eager to address the crises of our time. It might follow from this formulation that architecture could effect some change in the use of forms of energy. From its side of the formal equation, perhaps by some mechanism of reverse engineering, architecture might point to the feasibility of a postcarbon form. This holds, however, only if we understand capitalism as the resultant product of the turn to fossil fuels, and the spatial orders and technologies associated with these. This is, though, to have things the wrong way around. Capitalism originates in an agrarian condition for which the main source of energy is available biomass, the same source on which spatial and social orders as diverse as nomadism, feudalism, and absolutism were sustained. The acceleration of fossil fuel use is driven by the determinate historical and material circumstances of capitalism, not the reverse. If we misunderstand this, we might conceive of our unfolding ecological crisis as resolvable within and by the existing capitalist order rather than as its inevitable by-product. Confining architecture to imagining sustainable futures, or exercising its disciplinary specificity in proposals for new spatial forms, might seem like the more manageable task. But this is to confine the agency of architecture to the role ascribed to it within and for capitalism. Any potential for architecture to contribute meaningfully to social, economic, political, or ecological transformation begins with critically understanding and moving beyond these confines, in recognizing architecture's extradisciplinary relations of interdependence, and in making alliances, forming solidarities, and taking sides. For this potential to be realized, the agency of *architects*, as workers, situated in political, economic, and environmental circumstances, has to be acknowledged over that of the agency of *architecture* as an all-but exhausted instrument for sustaining the unsustainable.

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