NOVA UTOPIA, 2010-2013

Steven Walter
sephenwalterart@yahoo.co.uk

This work is about an enduring human desire to create order and unity in the world, and the imagining of a perfect place and a society where justice prevails for all.

Utopian notions have existed in our minds for thousands of years. When Thomas More first wrote 'Utopia' in 1516 and coined the term, it was a play on the Greek Latin words *eu-topos* - meaning 'good place' and *ou-topos* – meaning 'no place' [1]. Here, at the very centre of More's concept laid a question and a half-truth which has led to a continuing ambivalence towards the idea of a Utopia being one defining work or entity.

The monoliths of Nurnburg and others left behind from the last hundred years of European history, now testify to the dark side of grand Utopian projects. On such a large national scale they inevitably result in the eradication of people who do not fit into the plan. However, Western social security systems for example, do stand for how vast bureaucracies can be great forces for the good.

When Robert Hughes said "it seems, like plants, we do need the shit of others for nutriments in order to thrive" [2] he was reacting to the clean-slate policy of the city plan of Brasilia and other such Corbusian models for life. Old cities with their multiple layers of history and cultural residues are places that enrich our lives, and we like living in them – they have soul. With this in mind, large Utopias must now surely be a balance between what is 'imagined' and what is 'practical' as well as ones of compromise between the will of the 'people' and the 'individual' - perhaps a re-mixing, a re-appropriating and a re-purposing of what has come before. My map *Nova Utopia* [3], shown here is a manifestation drawn upon these principles.

In Thomas More's foundational text, he describes the customs of an Island race through a third person - Raphael Hythlodæus, (latterly renamed Raphael Nonsenso). Raphael becomes More's conduit or filter through which his imaginings are shaped. He goes on to chronicle how life on the island of Utopia was structured, somewhere in a nondescript part of the New World from which he had just returned. It had been an egalitarian society built upon the principles of communalism, where the idea of the private ownership of land was a cardinal sin. Utopia had no currency of its own and would only stock-pile foreign money, gained through its

exports, for security reasons such as employing the mercenary Venalians to fights its own wars…

Nova Utopia, created 2010-2013, uses More's book of 1516 as its backstory, treating the island as if were a real place. It is a fictionalization of *Utopia*, shown in the present day, 500 years on from when it was first written. Certain things that he described remain - like the traces of its 54 elegant towns spread evenly throughout the area. Its size is roughly the same and it has a prominent bay now named the Mouth of Feo, with its outcrops of rocks and a garrison tower. Many of its towns are now named after the nations exports mentioned in the book.

There were many things in More's text that annoyed me and that I felt were anachronisms. Essentially, he describes a stifling society. I would use some of these flaws, to dismantle his society, imagining the island in a contemporary setting and after the Capitalist Revolution of 1900.

I use Abraham Ortelius' 1596 map of Utopia as my aesthetic template, mirroring its own shape and coastline and echoing his web of varying languages for his place-names, many of which were geographical contradictions, for example *Andrus flu* (Greek – meaning 'river without water') [4]. I remix this patterning here, using the dominant languages of my sphere - mainly English, Spanish and Latin, with a scattering of German, French, and Mandarin Chinese. I also construct a hybrid language for some of the island's regional names.

From these two main sources, I go on to construct my version of Utopia and form a new history around these existing platforms.

The Utopia presented here is a holiday destination, a 'Leisure Island' or perhaps an England in the sun. It has become a victim of its own success - selling its soul to mass tourism. All things, including the natural surroundings, have become commodities - price tags pop up everywhere.

Nova Utopia has now developed into a collection of regions distinct from one another and a compendium of alternate forces. The small projects tend to attract only like-minded clientele and political tensions lie beneath the surface under the guise of a pleasingly traditional and unifying aesthetic that cloaks a set of uncertainties and contradictions.

Polemic patterns have emerged on the island with the towns of Zenith and Nadir and the regions of Feo and Idilica found on opposing sides. Although it is a depiction of a wonderful place, the nation finds itself at a number of precarious tipping points. Other clues and historical references are buried in the map to be deciphered with a closer look.

The choice of this traditional aesthetic is an act that pre-empts the out-dating nature of futurology today. New technological inventions will immediately blow outmoded concepts from the water, yet it seems that the fundamental human spirit and the tantalizing questions about Utopias remain constant. Like all Utopias in a finite World, this is a comment on the politics of space and what constitutes private and public land. It is a Utopia of the relations between separate entities where the map is the stage on which this balancing game is played out.

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[1] The British Library website - http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/21cc/utopia/utopia.html
[2] Robert Hughes, *The Shock of The New*, TV Series – The BBC, 1980. (*Trouble in Utopia,* 4/8).
[3] Nova- *a star that unexpectedly becomes very bright and then returns to its normal brightness over a period*

of months or years - Macmillan Dictionary (on line) 2012

[4] Thanks to Marcel van den Broecke (Cartographica Neerlandica, Bilthoven, The Netherlands), the owner of the only existing Ortelius Map, for his research points referenced here. The matter is yet to be published.

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