

**Timothy
Miller**

University of Kansas
USA

VISIONARY ARCHITECTURE OF UTOPIAN COMMUNITIES

Distinctive, and sometimes visionary, architecture has often been envisioned for, or constructed at, utopian communities around the world. Sometimes the plans are fantastic, so much so that they never get built. Others get built, but often not exactly as planned.

Sometimes such structures are built in pursuit of a great vision, often spiritual or religious; sometimes motivations are ethical, as in the case of the ecovillages that are creating new architectural forms not as works of beauty, but as positive improvements for the planetary environment. Those kinds of visionary commitments have led to such innovations as cob construction (which is essentially dirt, sand, and a small amount of organic material), straw bale, and earthbag buildings. Some underground structures have also been



innovative. Another motivation is efficient use of labor, making buildings that promote communal productivity as well as values. And some innovative structures are adopted as a result of economic necessity when members of a community live on very little money.

Many contingencies affect communal architecture, sometimes giving it dramatic form, but more often making it less ambitious than originally projected. One problem frequently encountered by communities is inadequate funding, a situation that can impact building plans heavily. Thus projects are started that never can be completed, or entirely new projects emerge to fit the financial, human, and material resources of a community. Another problem is that communitarians devoted to a high ideal are not necessarily good architects or builders, and thus a grand plan can turn out dismally.

But visionary structures and landscapes do get created in many cases, and even where they do not, visionary plans are sometimes left behind to inspire us.

This communitarian journey has several components. I will show some original architecture that did get built, much of it still available to see today. I will also show some imaginative architecture that did not survive very long. Finally, I will show some imaginative plans that never did reach construction.

A new architecture emerges

I want to start with an American example, one that inspired a whole generation of communitarians to build domes. Drop City, located in Colorado, USA, was envisioned by three artists in Kansas and built beginning in 1965. It had its origins when two of the founders lived together in a loft

while attending the University of Kansas as art students and started doing art work from their loft. One such piece of art was a boot swung from a rope over the sidewalk. Another was a complete breakfast, ready to eat, set on the sidewalk in front of a local hotel. They called their creations Drop Art, and they watched the reactions of the pedestrians who happened to walk by and see the situational artworks, which they called *Droppings*.



[Fig. 1] Dropper art: boot on rope. Courtesy of Gene Bernofsky.

Soon they decided to set up an ideal community, and found a small plot of rural land in Colorado. They knew nothing about construction, so the first buildings they built were a bit idiosyncratic. But soon one of the founders went to a lecture given by Buckminster Fuller, inventor of the geodesic dome, and excited by his work the group decided to build their own domes—

in their own way, because they really had no idea how a geodesic was properly constructed. The Droppers were impoverished, so they had to make up their own form of doing things. They used scrap lumber for their frames and chopped out the tops of junked cars to cover their domes. Soon their structures became more elaborate; these joined domes were known as *the Complex*.



[Fig. 2] Drop City domes. Courtesy of Gene Bernofsky.



[Fig. 3] Drop City complex. Public domain.

Drop City continued for several years as a wildly creative community of artists, enjoying a largely unstructured common spirit. They often worked together on art projects, as in the creation of what they called the *Ultimate Painting*, which was mounted on a pivot and spun amid flashing strobe lights.

But most of the founders left after two or three years and, with no membership screening process in place, some of their replacements were troubled or even violent. Drop City finally closed after eight years and the property was sold back to the man from whom the Droppers had originally bought it. No buildings survive.

Temples and fantastic devices

Perhaps the most ambitious piece of communal architecture in many decades is the underground temple at Damanhur. The temple was built illegally; workers chipped out the rock from inside a mountain and then provided fantastic decorations for the finished temple. The result has been a most unusual and beautiful, if idiosyncratic, structure that has attracted visitors from around the world.

Damanhur members take names of plants and animals. Thus the founder of Damanhur, whose given name was Oberto Airaudi, was known within the community as Falco Tarassaco (Falcon Dandelion). Located in northwestern Italy, Damanhur, which was founded in 1975, has sought sustainable living in harmony with nature as well as the spiritual development of its members and guests. But it is the imaginative underground temple—the Temple of Humankind—for which it is best known. It consists of a series of interconnected rooms with different motifs, several of them with marvelous stained-glass domes.



[Fig. 4] Hall of the earth, Damanhur. Courtesy of Damanhur.org.



[Fig. 5] Hall of water, Damanhur. Courtesy of Damanhur.org.

And there is much more creative artistry at Damanhur. There is an outdoor temple, and one might encounter an altar, a sculpture or an elaborately painted house.

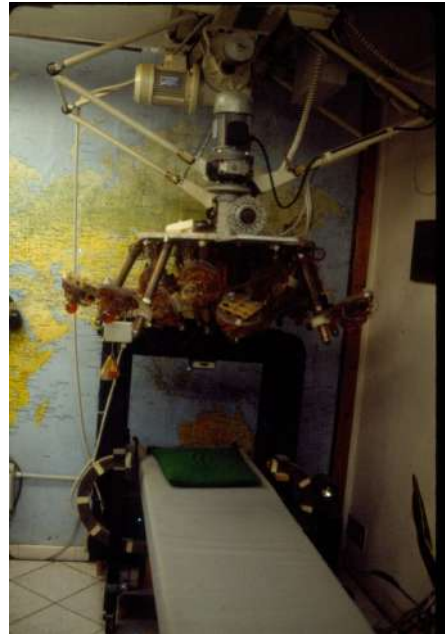


[Fig. 6] Outdoor temple, Damanhur. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

Part of the Damanhurian philosophy has to do with “selfic” devices that are said to have powers that promote healing, rejuvenation, and personal development, and are artistic treasures in themselves.



[Fig. 7] Selfic device, Damanhur.
Public domain.



[Fig. 8] Selfic healing device, Damanhur.
Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

A New Age and a new architecture

The Findhorn Foundation, in Scotland, the flagship community of the New Age movement, first came into public view as the place where members cultivated giant vegetables. You might think that the extraordinary growth came from the long sunlight of the far north country, but the Findhorn founders said it was from the members' attunement with the nature devas, or nature spirits.



[Fig. 9] Findhorn vegetables. Public domain.

From the beginning in 1962, Findhorn was a spiritual community. One of its three founders was Eileen Caddy, who heard what she called an inner voice and communicated her spiritual messages to her associates. The reputation of the community spread, and more people began to arrive, until residents came to number in the hundreds and visitors in the thousands. Members began to build beautiful, if unconventional, buildings.



[Fig. 10] Findhorn meditation retreat. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

Perhaps the most unusual and creative of Findhorn's buildings are the barrel houses. What does one do with used whisky barrels, which are abundant in the north of Scotland? The longtime Findhorn resident Roger Doudna decided to turn one into his house.



[Fig. 11] The original barrel house with its builder, Roger Doudna. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

Black Egyptians in America

A group originally known as Ansaaru Allah originally was one of the Black Muslim movements, but its leader, Malachi York, stretched his religious vision enormously. At one point, he claimed to be a black American Indian; later his movement was characterized as Egyptian and called itself the Nuwaubian Nation. During its Egyptian phase the movement built these monuments at its community in Georgia, USA, known as Tama-Re:



[Fig. 12] Sphinx at Tama-Re. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.



[Fig. 13] Entry gate at Tama-Re. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

Tama-Re is no longer to be seen, however. It was closed and the buildings and sculptures destroyed following Malachi York's conviction on child molestation and financial charges in 2004.

Practical visionaries

But other communal architecture is very much with us. The people of the Tamera community and ecovillage in Portugal are what we might call practical visionaries. Tamera was founded in 1995 in southern Portugal by several spiritually-minded peace activists who had originally come together in Germany, where they created the ZEGG community (the name is an acronym for Zentrum für experimentelle Gesellschaftsgestaltung, or Center for Experimental Cultural Design) in 1991. At their new site in Portugal they

set out to reclaim land that was turning into desert, and thus to restore the local environment and make the land productive once again. Among other things, the environmental projects at Tamera are using the power of the sun in several innovative ways, and straw bale and other environmentally sound building practices are the community's norm.

The project's name, Tamera, is said to be an old Egyptian word meaning "at the original source." The people of Tamera, who recently numbered about 170, are combining some old ways of living with the latest technology. Using solar energy is certainly not new; ancient peoples in several far-flung places developed curved mirrors that intensified the sun's energy for cooking. In the last several decades, however, great advances in efficiency and design have brought the concept to the point that it could be used in normal daily life, and the ecovillages get a good deal of credit for the technical progress that many have made. Tamera has a project it calls the Testfield for a Solar Village, described as "a prototype for the testing of decentralized energy systems under the everyday conditions of a village of about fifty people." The results of these experiments are to be used to build a true solar village that is self-sufficient in food and energy. This mirror focuses the sun's rays on an oven that heats very quickly to cooking or baking temperatures.



[Fig. 14] Solar mirror at Tamera. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

Other projects at Tamera are focused on creating energy-efficient buildings. This large central assembly hall, called simply *The Aula*, is of straw-bale construction with a green roof, and is said to be the largest straw-bale building on the Iberian Peninsula. Several other structures at Tamera are also of straw-bale construction; the community also has adobe structures in its quest to test building techniques both old and new. These adobe-arch buildings are simple but quite energy-efficient.



[Fig. 15] Adobe-arch buildings at Tamera. Courtesy of tamera.org.

The land in which Tamera is situated is known in Portugal as the Alentejo, a southern area of low population and, often, high summer temperatures. It has undergone significant desertification over many years, and one Tamera initiative is the making of water projects. Community members have built several lakes that are not sealed, but allow water to soak away, thus refreshing the water table in the area by diverting water that otherwise would have run into the ocean.

Tamera's vision for the future goes beyond physical projects; the community also works for world peace, leading peace pilgrimages to troubled parts of the world and providing a retreat space for peace workers. It also incorporates spiritual sites where members and visitors can meditate and the community can come together for rituals. One special place is a hilltop stone circle,

designed and in part constructed by Sabine Lichtenfels, a theologian and one of Tamera's co-founders.



[Fig. 16] Tamera stone circle. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

The Messiah on a French mountaintop

Another visionary endeavor resides in a different part of southern Europe. Aumism was founded by Gilbert Bourdin, a Frenchman who had investigated esoteric traditions in several different parts of the world, especially India. Back in France in the 1960s, he began accepting disciples into his Association of the Knights of the Golden Lotus. In 1969 they purchased land in mountains northwest of Nice in the South of France where they began to construct the Holy City of Mandarom Shambhalasalem at a place where they believed the

Messiah would soon arrive. Over the next two decades the Aumistes built several temples and several large statues of such figure as the Buddha, the Cosmic Christ, and the Cosmoplanetary Messiah—the latter bearing a strong resemblance to Bourdin, now known as Swami Hamsananda Sarasvati. In all the Holy City was a statement of the unity of the world's religions.



[Fig. 17] Holy City of the Mandarom. Courtesy of David Monniaux, Wikimedia commons.



[Fig. 18] Entry to the Holy City of the Mandarom. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

France has had a strong “antisecte” movement since the 1990s, a movement that opposes new religions and their influence. For many years the Aumists have been the objects of scorn and vocal opposition. Finally the antisecte forces prevailed, and in 2001 the statue of the Cosmoplanetary Messiah was toppled by explosives set by local public authorities. The Aumists were outraged, of course, but Bourdin had died in 1998, and the movement has dwindled somewhat since.

Saving the earth, creatively

The vision in some communities is environmental. Our modern construction methods are usually quite wasteful in construction, use, and demolition, and contribute enormously to the climate-change crisis that is rolling over us.

Here the ecovillages, which have emerged over the last several years, are making important strides to minimize the environmental impact of wasteful humans and at the same time creating visionary architecture. Some examples of environmentally sane architecture are not spectacular, but their beauty lies in the economy and environmental values they present. At *the Farm* in Tennessee, USA, for example, a range of experiments in building is taking shape. Some of the new buildings there are of straw bale construction. But others are even more innovative than that. The Farm recently has been experimenting with green roofs and with earthbag construction.



[Fig. 19] Green roof at the Farm. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.



[Fig. 20] Earthbag building. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

Some of the Farm's buildings are constructed with recycled materials, as in the case of dish antennae that have been lifted up to make roofs for tiny houses, or for an outdoor oven.

And even the sewage disposal is environmentally sound, with a sewage lagoon made of old automobile tires.

A concrete education

Attempts to make buildings unusually durable can result in striking structures. The members of Tolstoy Farm in Washington state, USA, decided to put a concrete roof on their schoolhouse, and many years later it is perfectly intact, even though the school no longer meets there.



[Fig. 21] Schoolhouse at Tolstoy Farm. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

Creative castoffs

The Earthship Community in New Mexico, USA, is especially creative. Its houses and other structures are built largely of old automobile tires and other castoff materials, including aluminum cans and glass bottles.



[Fig. 22] Earthship. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.



[Fig. 23] Earthship house of bottles. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

Reduce and recycle

Environmentally sensitive construction often reuses existing materials. At Dancing Rabbit in Missouri, USA, one of the houses was made from a grain bin.



[Fig. 24] Grain bin house at Dancing Rabbit. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

Buildings created by artists

Sometimes visionary buildings never get built, or if they do, they don't work. At the Libre community in Colorado, USA, one imaginative building failed badly. That house was built around a boulder. Before the house was built, the boulder would get hot in the sun and so it seemed that the heat retained by the

rock could help heat a house there. But once the structure was in place, it cut off the sun and the rock became cold, making the house harder than ever to heat. Libre is a community of artists, and the whole community is filled with innovative buildings and other artworks.



[Fig. 25] House built around a boulder, Libre community, Colorado, USA. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.



[Fig. 26] Another house at Libre. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

The spiritual path is not straight

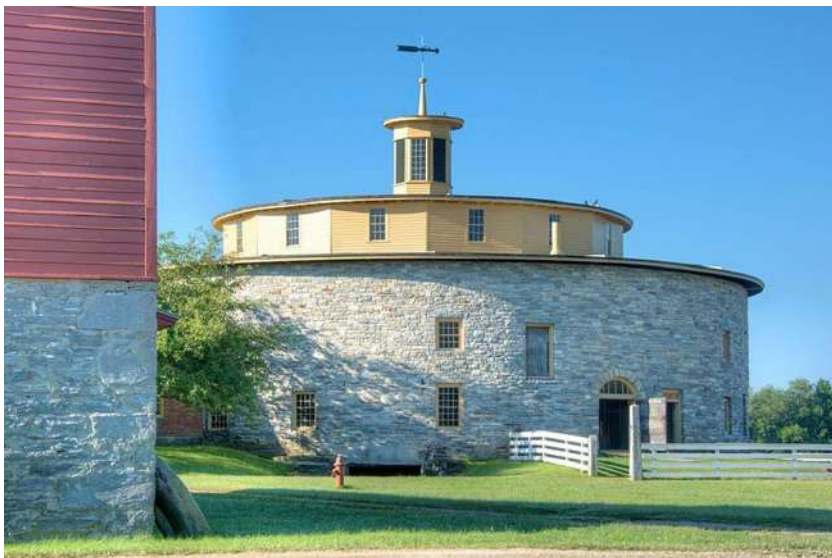
Some visionary building and landscape designs are related to religious beliefs. The Harmony Society, which originated in Germany and then moved to America, built labyrinths at its communal villages. The labyrinth stood for the complicated way of the spiritual path, with its false starts and backtracking. At the center of each Harmonist labyrinth was a simple and rather crude hut—a reminder that what we encounter at the end of the spiritual quest may well surprise us.



[Fig. 27] Labyrinth at New Harmony, Indiana, USA. Courtesy of University of Southern Indiana.

Beauty in simplicity

Some buildings can be built with practical use in mind and still be strikingly beautiful. The American Shakers built this barn into the side of a low hill. They could drive their wagons right into the upper level and unload hay; the cows could be driven in on the lower level, and the hay could be tossed down to them.



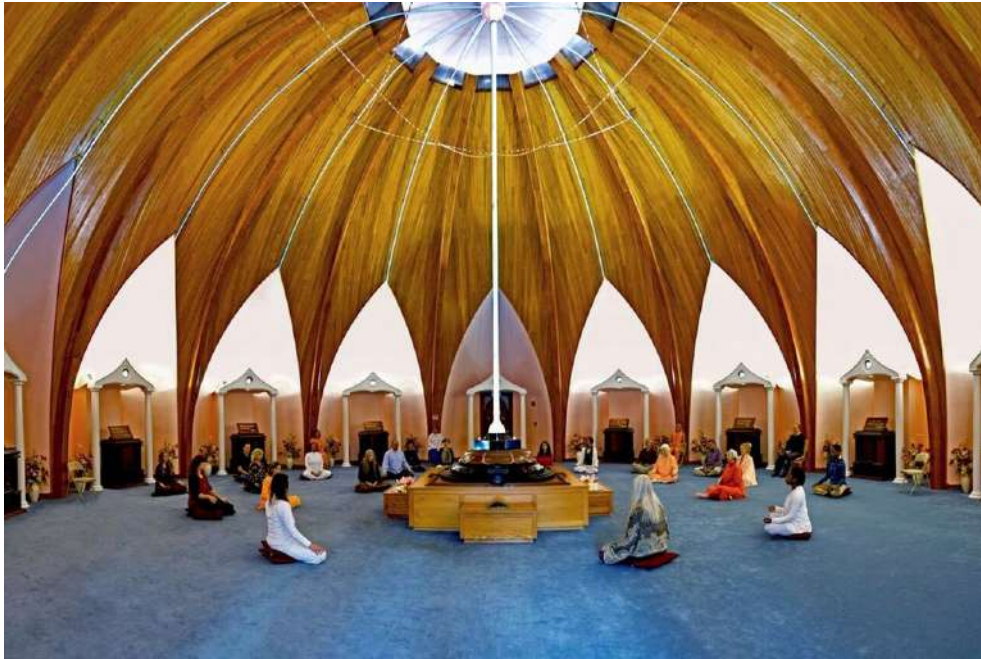
[Fig. 28] Round barn at Hancock Shaker Village. Courtesy of Bestbudbrian, via Wikimedia Commons.

We are all one

At Yogaville, the ashram of Swami Satchidananda in Virginia, USA, a shrine called the LOTUS –the Light of Truth Universal Shrine– stands for the unity of the world’s religions. The shrine has twelve sides, each with an altar for one of ten major world religions, plus one for all other known faiths and one for religions yet unknown.



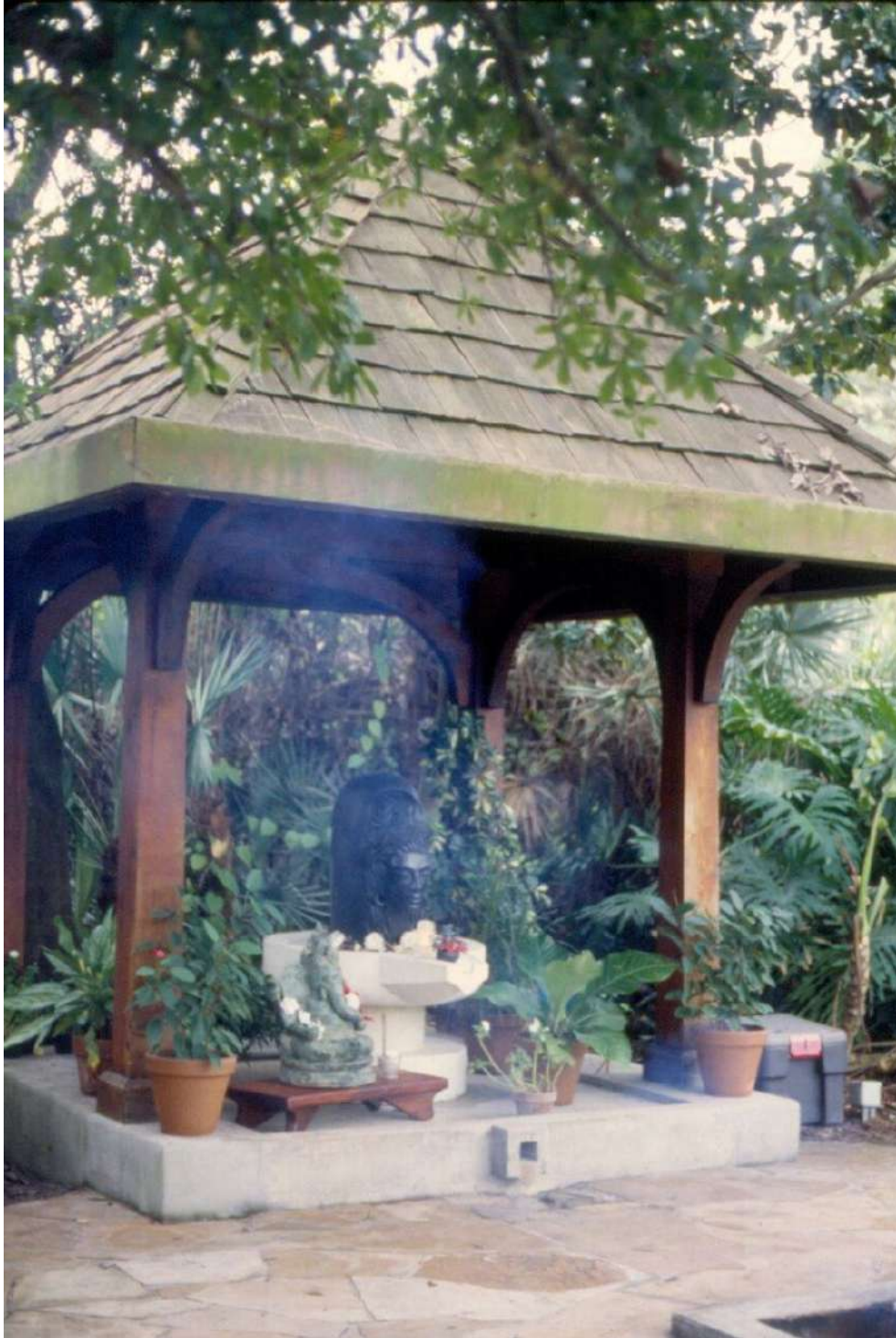
[Fig. 29] The LOTUS shrine. Courtesy of Panoramio, via Wikimedia Commons.



[Fig. 30] Interior of the LOTUS shrine. Courtesy of Pinterest.

All faiths together

Kashi Ashram is the spiritual community founded by the late eclectic spiritual teacher known as Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati. She was sometimes characterized as being in the “crazy wisdom” mode—funny, compassionate, demanding, outrageous, unpredictable. She founded Kashi Ashram as an interfaith center in Florida, USA. The many shrines on the grounds represent all religions and ways of worship.



[Fig. 31] Shrine at Kashi Ashram. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

The mystical art of Theosophy

The Theosophical Society and its many offshoots have produced esoteric and mystical literature and many unusual works of art and architecture. Perhaps the greatest assembly of Theosophically-inspired art was produced at Point Loma, in California, USA. There, with the generous support of the sporting-goods magnate Albert Spalding, several large temples and other buildings were erected in a variety of styles envisioned by the community's leader, Katherine Tingley. Tingley believed in the spiritual power of the color purple, and thus purple glass was found in many windows and ornaments in the community.

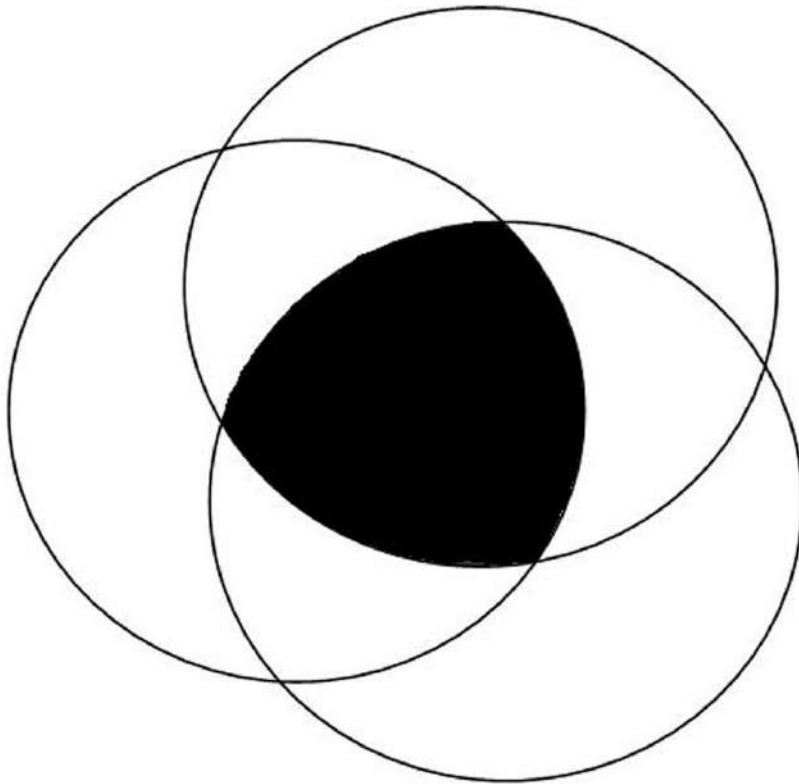


[Fig. 32] The Academy building at Point Loma. Public domain.

Several other Theosophical communities produced their own visionary art and architecture as well. One early branch of the original Theosophical Society, known as the Temple of the People, settled at Halcyon, California, and there built an unusual temple in the shape of an inflated triangle. Its shape was the intersection of three overlapping circles.



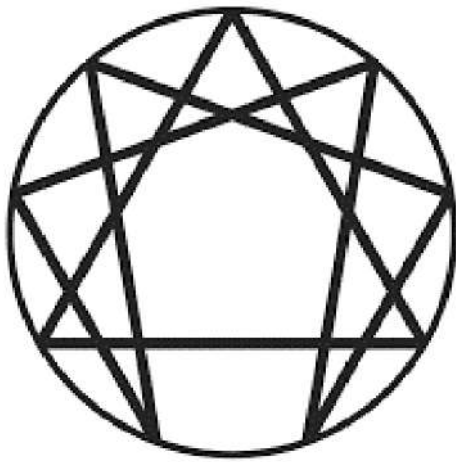
[Fig. 33] Temple of the People. Courtesy of Timothy Miller



[Fig. 34] Temple of the People design. Public domain.

Building the enneagram

The Georgian-Armenian mystic G. I. Gurdjieff believed in the great cosmic significance of the enneagram. When his disciple J. G. Bennett decided to build a hall to house meditation and the “movements” (a kind of ritualized dancing) that were essential to the Gurdjieff work, he based his design on the enneagram. The resulting building, at a Gurdjieff center in Coombe Springs, England, was a remarkable nine-sided, fifteen-meter-high building. Built in 1956, it was destined to last only a decade. The property passed into different ownership in 1965 and the buildings on it were soon leveled.



[Fig. 35] Enneagram. Public domain.



[Fig. 36] The Djamichunatra. Public domain.

Jezreel's Tower

Also in England once stood Jezreel's Tower in Gillingham, Kent. James Jezreel, originally called James White, became involved in the Christian Israelite Church, a group of believers who claimed spiritual descent from Joanna Southcott, the eighteenth/nineteenth-century English prophet whose ongoing influence resides mainly in her claim that she was leaving the secret of world peace in a sealed box that could be opened only in a time of crisis and only in the presence of all the bishops (then numbering twenty-four) of the Church of England. In the 1880s Jezreel directed the erection of a massive headquarters building in the shape of a cube. He died before its completion, however, and after several attempts to make it useful the building was finally demolished in 1961.



[Fig. 37] Jezreel's Tower. Public domain.

The arcology solution

One of the most ambitious and visionary architectural projects ever is still under construction in the American desert. Paolo Soleri was an Italian architect whose most famous work was done in the United States. He developed what he called “arcology,” meaning architecture plus ecology. He believed that radically innovative urban design was required by an environmentally challenged world, and set for to show what an improved urban way of life with a lowered environmental impact could look like. North of Phoenix, Arizona, USA, he purchased land and began to build what he called an urban laboratory to test his ideas--a town he called Arcosanti. Students come to Arcosanti to study Soleri’s ideas and to help build its structures, now numbering about a dozen. Soleri refused to accept government funding for Arcosanti in order to retain control over it. Some funding came from the community’s manufacture of bronze bells.



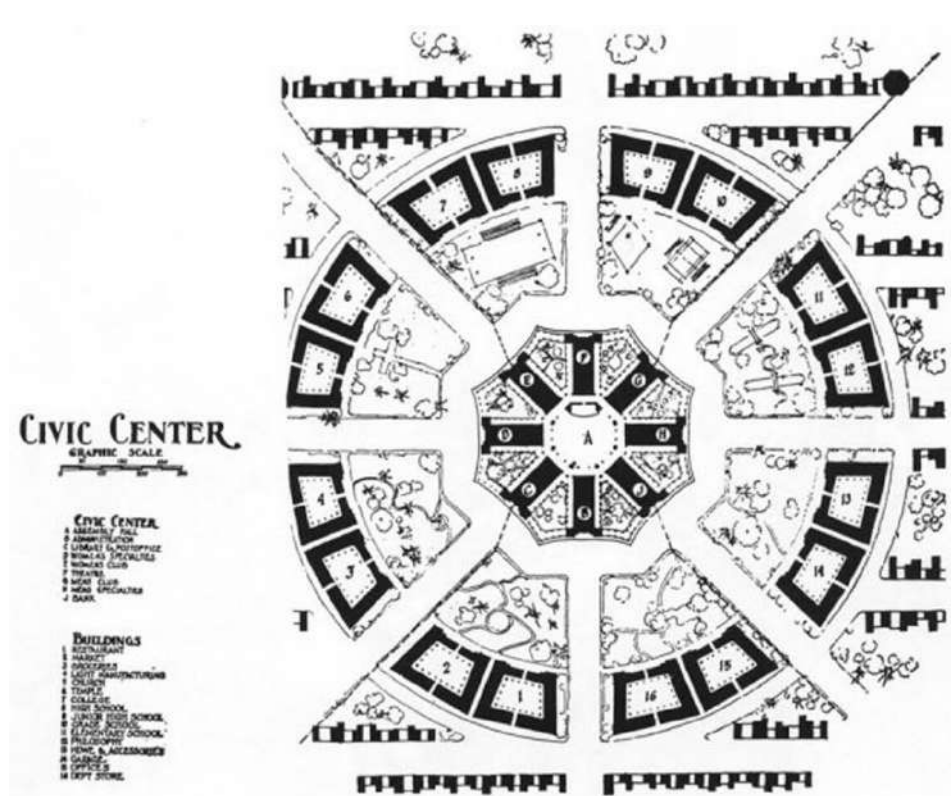
[Fig. 38] Apse workshops at Arcosanti. Courtesy of Pinterest.



[Fig. 39] Model of the future city. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

A plan for a great socialist city

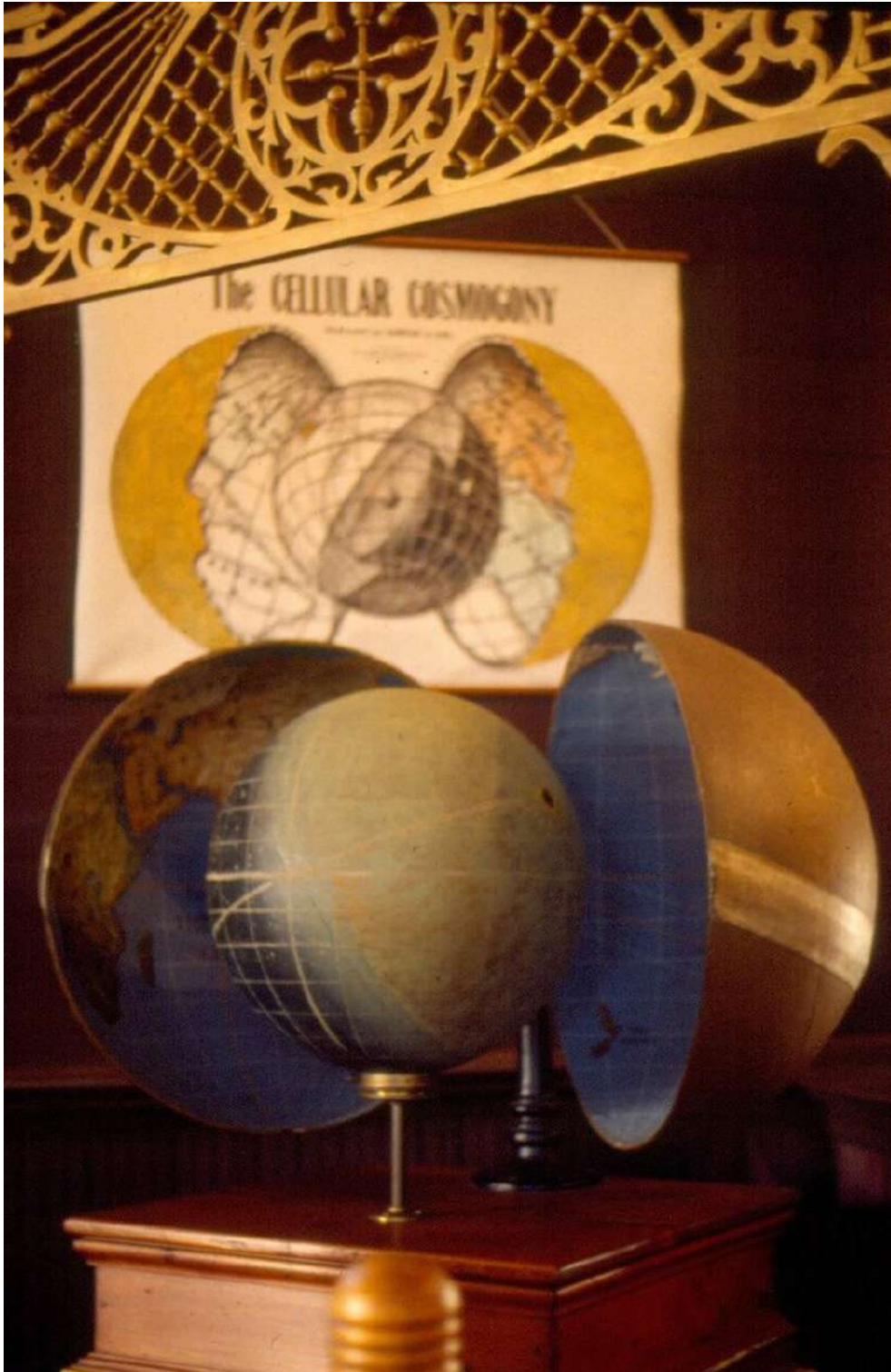
Other visionaries planned utopian ideal cities as well, although in many cases they never got built. Their city plans, with geometric street layouts, are often works of art in their own right, usually showing expansive parkland and orderly housing and shops. For example, the Llano del Rio colony outside Los Angeles, California, projected this design that would demonstrate the colony's values:



[Fig. 40] Llano del Rio city plan. Public domain.

Building inside the earth

And the Koreshan Unity similarly projected a symmetrical pattern for its “New Jerusalem,” the city the movement sought to build in Florida, USA. The Koreshan Unity had other visionary ideas as well, notably a belief that the earth was hollow and we live on the inside. Members built many models to show how the earth “really” was structured.

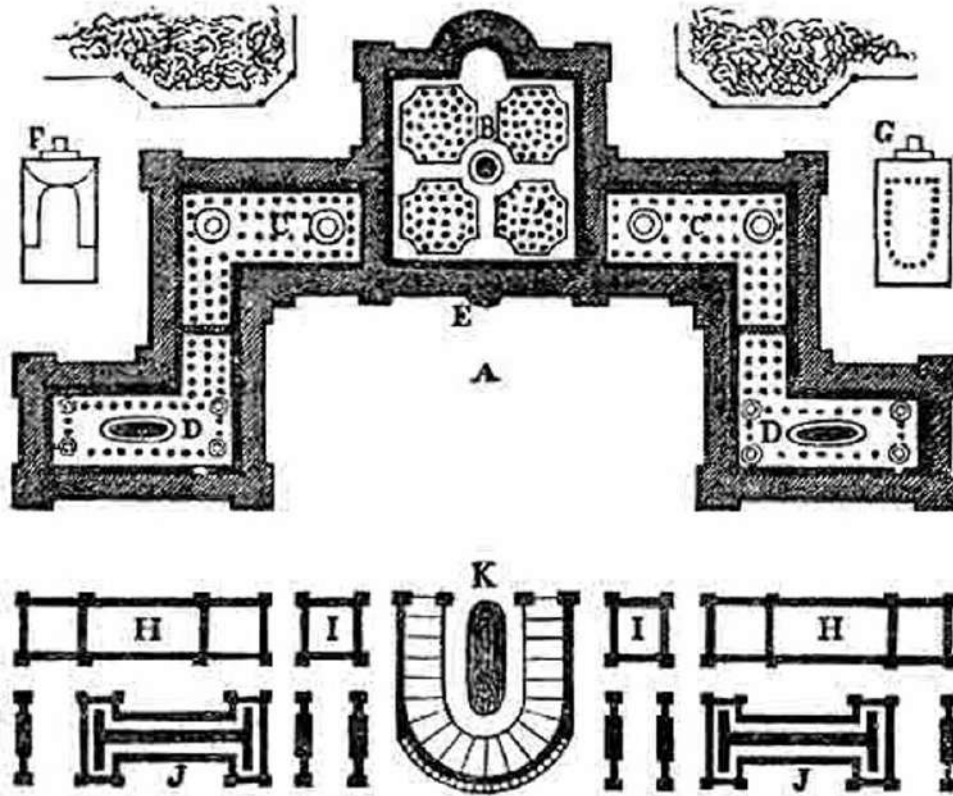


[Fig. 41] Koreshan Unity globe. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

They also conducted an elaborate experiment by which they claimed to have proven their hollow-earth hypothesis. It consisted of a long horizontal beam said to be perfectly straight that was mounted over the ocean near their property. If the earth were hollow, then the beam would eventually meet the water as the hollow earth curved upward.

Grand plans, modest execution

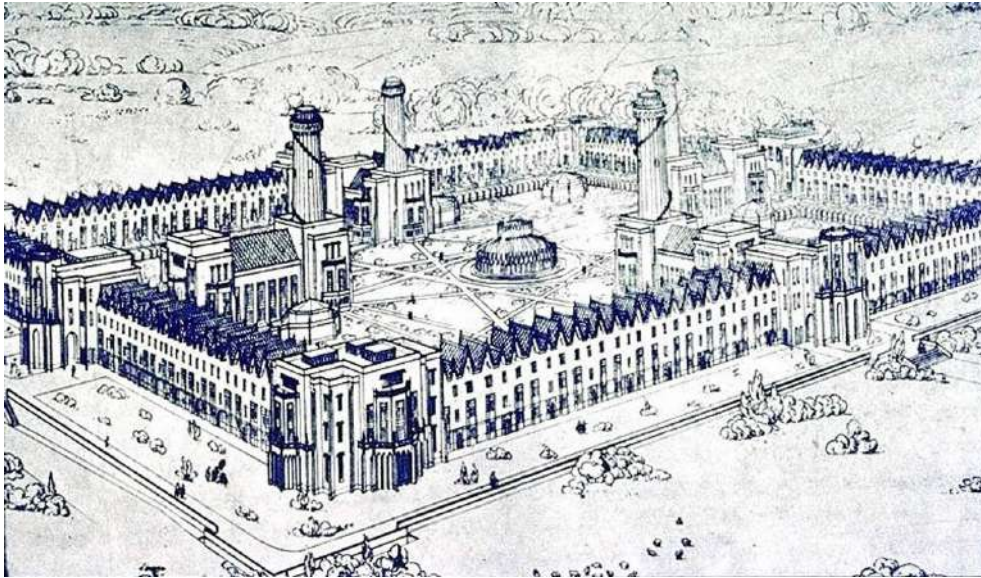
Perhaps it is not surprising that many extravagant proposals were never actually constructed. Historians of the utopian tradition note that the detailed plans for Fourierist phalanxes, as proposed by the French social dreamer Charles Fourier, were elaborate and never really came close to fruition. It is said that Fourier waited daily for his benefactor to appear and finance his grand plan, but that never happened.



[Fig. 42] Fourierist phalanx floor plan. Public domain.

An Owenite utopia

The British utopian Robert Owen similarly had a grand plan for a massive unitary building for his project at New Harmony, Indiana, USA, which was also never realized.



[Fig. 43] New Harmony plan. Public domain.

A visionary Hindu city plan

More recently the New Vrindaban commune of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness proposed to build a massive temple in South Indian style in West Virginia in the United States as part of its monumental “City of God.” Neither the temple nor the city ever was built.



[Fig. 44] New Vrindaban City of God plan. Public domain.

The boundless human imagination

Utopian communities have been envisioned and constructed by men and women for well over 2,000 years. No age lacks visionaries who, seeing the pathetic shortcomings of the world as it is, proclaim a new and better way for the human race to live and find fulfillment. No one knows when the first utopian community (which I define is a community that has specifically set itself apart from its larger social milieu, or mainstream society, on the basis of adherence to a common goal or vision) appeared, but it must have been thousands of years ago. The community of Pythagoras at Crotona, in present-day Italy, seems to have fit the model of a utopian community, and it existed in the sixth century B.C.E. It is perfectly reasonable to believe that the human race has had utopian communities continuously for thousands of years.

Scholars are always tempted to generalize, to find universal causes and themes and outcomes, but it is difficult to see any unifying thread in the utopian communities that sprout up in all times and places. One problem is that each one generally sprouts from one person's vision (or, less frequently, the vision of a few individuals working together), and the nature of such visions is given to wild variation. So in this brief survey we have such disparate projects as a fantastic underground temple, an attempt to prove that the earth is hollow, and a neolithic-appearing stone circle. There's not much that is common about those visions.

But wait—there really is a unifying thread after all. These non-literary utopian projects are just that—utopian. If we understand utopianism to be, as Lyman Sargent has put it, social dreaming, then that is present in each one of these cases.

We are inclined to think of utopian schemes as literary, and indeed the world is full of literary utopias. But utopianism is not at all bounded by one cultural form. Utopian visions can be executed in painting, sculpture, music—and architecture.

Visionary architecture is a tribute to the human imagination, no matter that it sometimes is never built. Utopian dreaming and unlimited idealism are great faculties of human beings, and may they ever be with us.