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FICTION AND PROJECTING: ARCHITECTURE AND IMAGE IN THE WORK OF THE *UTOPIA* GROUP (MEDELLÍN, 1979-2009)

Introduction

The 70s marked a series of ruptures with hegemonic models of modernity in Colombian art. The canons that had led to a history of art in the country and had shaped a national art scene for at least three decades underwent transformations that inaugurated new reflections on social representations, aesthetic approaches, and assessment of artistic production. The case of architecture was no different, for in the international context, postmodernism blurred the premises inherited from the modern movement, which resulted in new aesthetic approaches freed from tradition. Between the 1960s and 1970s,



architectural groups such as *Archigram* in the UK or *Superstudio* in Italy provided utopian reflections on urban space, which, by way of fiction, speculation, and figurative language, brought them closer to the fields of art. It is worth noting that these groups used the notion of utopia to propose enhancements in urban space which were expected to have an impact on social conditions – particularly with large scale constructions – as stated by the architect and critic Terence Riley: “In megastructures a new generation of architects saw potential for the transformation of culture, and for making the post-1968 world a better one.”¹



[Fig. 1] Utopía group, From the serie *The river route. Mies Walls. Calle Colombia*, 1979, colored photomontage, 40 x 40 cm. Suramericana de Seguros Collection, Medellín.

¹ Riley, T. (2002). *The changing of the avant-garde. Visionary architectural drawings from the Howard Gilman Collection*. New York: Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), p. 12.

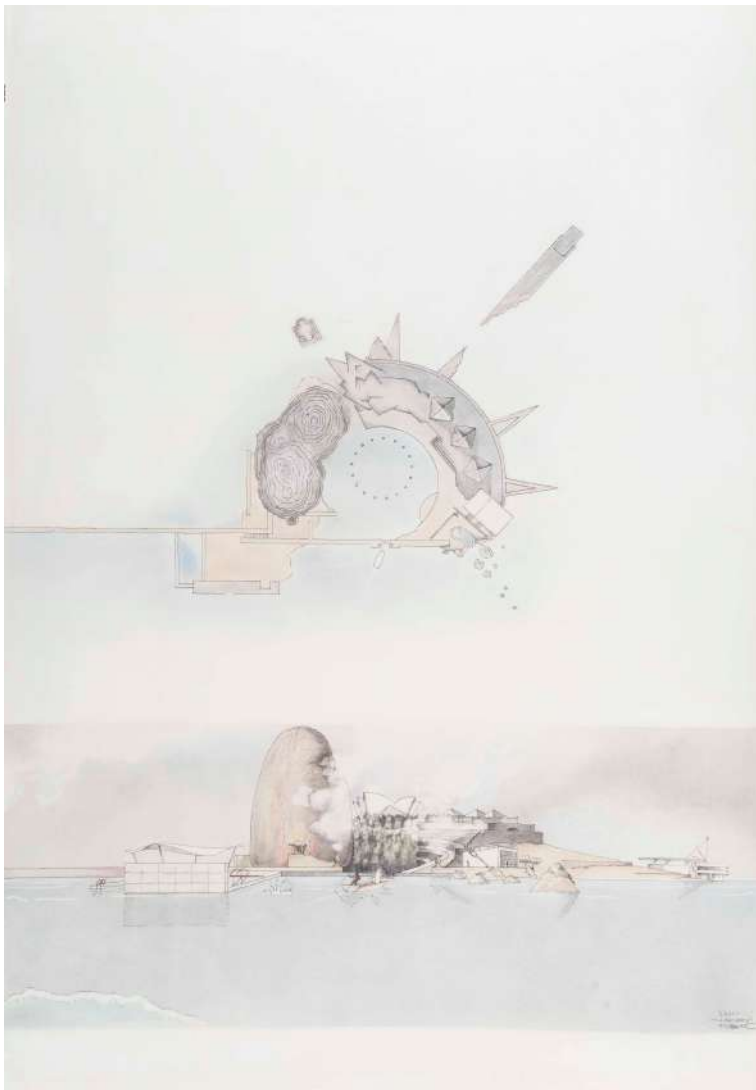
Against this backdrop, the *Utopía* group was one of the artist collectives which most meticulously sought to establish a relationship between art and architecture in Colombia. Their work fits into a time when postmodernism proposed new ways of thinking and producing artwork. The openness and pluralism brought by this time is clearly observed in this architectural collective, composed by Jorge Mario Gómez, Fabio Antonio Ramírez and Ana Patricia Gómez, insofar as they took the language employed in architectural design processes into the field of art by means of references to art history and literature. These references – which reveal the use of intertextual strategies – while usually considered in narrative and literary studies, can also be traced in art. In this regard, some authors, such as the Spanish theorist Simón Marchán Fiz, point out that artistic rupture processes occur due to a change in language studies, which is commonly referred to as the *linguistic turn*:

What is decisive is that if art, on the one hand, verifies its own negation – a hypothesis resulting in the “death of art” in Dadaism as well as in certain forms of Constructivisms – and its dialectical end, either in the increasingly deep separation between form and content or in the breakdown of the traditional notion of *art work* (...), on the other hand, with its coming of age it celebrates its autonomy with the analytical, experimental and “self-reflexive” dismantling of its own structures.²

This reveals how modernity in art has given rise to a reflection on its own language through creative practice, which following Marchán Fiz, has to do with the ‘return of language’. Particularly, in the work of *Utopía*, a clear dialogue is observed between major works of art history and architecture

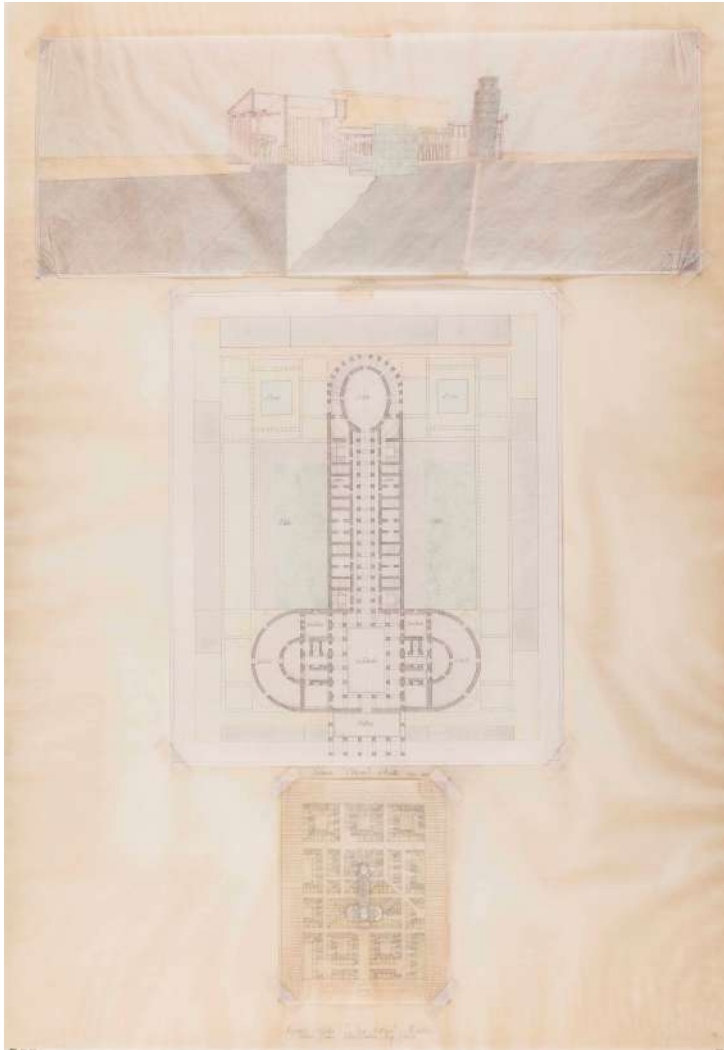
² Marchán Fiz, S. (1996). *La estética en la cultura moderna*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, p. 225.

which are referred to, parodied, or refigured. In this context, refiguration, perhaps one of the most recurring strategies used by *Utopía*, refers to the representative stage in which the reader or viewer must reconstruct, through reading the work, the plot implicit within.



[Fig. 2] Utopía group, From the serie *Isle of the Dead*. *Central Elevation*, 1986, drawing, 108 x 78 cm. Particular collection, Medellín.

As part of these intertextual strategies, it is worth mentioning the reference to Swiss architect Le Corbusier in the works *La ruta del río* (The river route) (1979), *San Sebastián* (1991), *Jardín Concreto* (Concrete garden) (1999), *Armazón* (Frame) (2002), *Umbral* (Threshold) (2003) and *El Caminante* (The walker) (2009). Also, we should consider the work *La isla de los muertos* (Isle of the Dead), which echoes the series of paintings produced by Arnold Böcklin between 1880 and 1886. The work engages in a dialogue with major referents from the history of western architecture such as the Pyramids of Egypt (2500 B.C.), the Sydney Opera House (1973), and the Real Club Náutico de San Sebastián building (1929), all of which are part of the parodic speculation carried out by *Utopía* on the spatial configuration the island painted by Böcklin might have. Finally, a work that can also be considered under this strategy is *Remodelación para un sector del centro de la ciudad* (Remodeling for an area of downtown) (1982). By means of architectural drawings, the work puts into dialogue the project for *Oikema* (1780) by the French architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, an area of Medellín's city-center and the Tower of Pisa (1372). Thus, this intertextuality allows *Utopía* to understand and build a discourse that revolves around history which is revised and criticized by the group.



[Fig. 3] Utopía group, *Remodeling for a downtown area*, 1982, draw with pencil and pastel, 98 x 68 cm. Particular collection, Medellín.

Not uncommonly, the work of *Utopía* relies on *imagined architectures*, which are only realized through in three-dimensional models or in drawings that allude to the language of an architectural project. These *possible architectures* (as termed by the Spanish theorist Juan Antonio Ramírez) which, given their speculative and narrative nature can be considered fictions, offer a perspective in addressing the relationship between art and architecture in Colombia. They also evidence the visual, imaginative, and fictional nature of

western utopian and dystopian thinking, which is embodied by the work of *Utopía* in the Colombian scene. They show one form of realization of narratives defining the reflection on the city and the social order. Nonetheless, the utopian discourse on the city proposed by the artist collective should be understood in parallel with reality, as stated by Ramírez himself:

Reality and utopia are two specular terms, whose relevant position varies according to the moment and place within which they are considered. The ultimate iconicity of “the real” is defined solely by comparison with the ultimate abstraction of ‘the utopian’, and the other way around. Societies have imagined themselves living in a factual and dense world, inhabited by objects, only when they have been able to imagine another symmetric and non-existent world.³

In the work of *Utopía*, while architecture addresses both the real and the factual, that is to say, the creation of buildings, utopia refers to a discourse about an unreal world or a ‘non-place’, where architecture could only be present through representations in the artistic realm.

Against the background of this relationship between art and architecture, the methodology used by *Utopía* plays a key role. They use a workshop-based approach to address specific projects, taken as architectural endeavors. This methodology involves the group gathering around a worktable to speculate about the aesthetic possibilities for each artistic project. And it is right there, inside the workshop, where speculation leads to the realization of an art form, where the process takes on a creative dimension, derived from a traditional view that can be described as project-oriented. This methodology raises, in

³ Ramírez, J. A. (1991). *Edificios y sueños. Estudios sobre arquitectura y utopía*. Madrid: Editorial Nerea, p. 25.

turn, the issue of how collaborative work is inserted as a production strategy in the Colombian context.

This paper proposes a review of the *Utopía* group in light of a historical moment that was paramount for contemporary art in Colombia. A moment where events such as the Cuarta Bienal de Medellín (Fourth Medellín Biennial) and the Coloquio de Arte No-Objetual y Arte Urbano (Non-Object and Urban Art Colloquium) became starting points for incorporating other disciplines, such as architecture, into the art field. Colombian art historian Carlos Arturo Fernández refers to the context of these aforementioned events as a period of consolidation of art in Medellín on the national scene, thanks to the Coltejer Art Biennial and the foundation of the Medellín Museum of Modern Art.⁴ Two questions are addressed in this paper. Firstly, how does the project-oriented speculative language of architecture challenge the ‘concrete’ languages of sculpture, drawing, painting and installation? Secondly, how can the image be a means to speculate about a possible vision of urban spaces through a dialogue of local and global elements with the hegemonic discourse of art history in Latin America?

⁴ Fernández, C. (2006). *Apuntes para una Historia del Arte Contemporáneo en Antioquia*. Medellín: Instituto para el Desarrollo de Antioquia.



[Fig. 4] Utopía group, *Coltejer*, 1982, drawing, 100 x 70 cm. Particular collection, Medellín.

1. The *Utopía* group, a contingent grouping

The three members of the group were born right in the middle of the twentieth century, something which, considered in social and cultural terms, defines a generation of architects characterized by a critical view on space and urbanism. Towards the 1960s, the space emerged as a category of interest

among social and human sciences. This marked the thinking of the city during the second half of the twentieth century and it is still a subject inciting anthropologists, sociologists, historians and architects interest. In this regard, the Spanish art historian Javier Maderuelo states:

Certainly, in the sixties (...) a particular interest in all matters related to space is observed, which will be reflected in the use of space as a theme in art and architecture, an interest resulting from a new understanding and appreciation of space.⁵

The *Utopía* group began its work in 1979, in response to a suggestion from the curator Eduardo Serrano to participate in the *V Salón Atenas* (Fifth Athens Salon) in Bogotá (Lopera, 2014: 91). After participating in the *Salón Atenas*, the group maintained its visual production in response to exhibitions and specific events, where their concerns about space, territory, geography and architecture were reaffirmed in the artistic discourse. Such is the case of the artworks made for the *Arte erótico* (Erotic art) (1981), *El MAMM sobre la ciudad* (Museum of Modern Art of Medellin on the city) (1984), *La arquitectura en Colombia* (Colombian architecture) (1985), *Concurso Nacional de Arte Riogrande II* (National art competition Riogrande II) (1989), *Utopía. Una mirada retrospectiva* (Utopia. A retrospective) (1991), *Rosas diabólicas* (Diabolical roses) (1997) and *Archipiélagos* (Archipelagos) (2005) exhibitions. These exhibitions not only were turning points in the aesthetic discourse of the artist collective, but also reflected a local and national interest in the relationship between art and architecture.

While these interests have been always marked by reflections on the space in its different scales, in recent years they have shifted from concerns about urbanism and architecture to questions around geography and territory

⁵ Maderuelo, J. (2008). *La idea de espacio en la arquitectura y el arte contemporáneos, 1969 – 1989*. Madrid: Akal, p. 22.

(Giraldo & Roldán, 2014: 25). This shift has probably been driven by the MA degree in Geography completed by Ana Patricia Gómez at the Instituto Agustín Codazzi (Agustín Codazzi Institute), as well as by the link Jorge Mario Gómez and Fabio Antonio Ramírez have kept with aviation. The overhead look over the territory has prompted the collective to see geography as a potential object of study in visual arts (Giraldo & Roldán, 2014: 12).



[Fig. 5] Utopía group, *Tribute to Bolívar*, 1983, drawing with pencil and pastel on paper, 104 x 76 cm. Particular collection, Medellín.

It is important to bear in mind that the architects who graduated from architecture schools in Medellín during the 1970s were strongly influenced by some formulations of the modern movement, particularly by Le Corbusier

or Mies Van der Rohe. At the same time, they began to assimilate a post-structuralist discourse that was consolidating in the international arena as it established relationships with art and architecture. In *Los manifiestos del arte posmoderno*, Anna Maria Guasch defines postmodernism as follows:

It is the history of an era that, relying on the principle of difference, and leaving aside the term that defines it, (...) has generated a revealing spread of artistic and exhibition discourses, from those imbricated with the philosophy of the "weak" subject to those proclaiming the gaze of the other and globalization, through appropriationists, simulationists and deconstructivists.⁶

As expected, the intersection between these two models of thought led to an aesthetic result influenced by philosophy, present in the initial conception of the creative process. Thus, the project was conceived, not relying on the pure functionality claimed by the modern movement, but on the philosophical reflection that could be done on context and history. It should be recalled that in 1988 the philosopher Jacques Derrida and the architects Philip Johnson and Peter Eisenman organized the *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art of New York, where the relationship between French post-structuralist thinking and architecture was consolidated:

The notion of architecture that will be reflected in the exhibition (...) expresses the translation, into architectural terms, of a new way of reading in which the conflicting elements of a text are exposed in order to contradict and shatter any sort of definitive and irrevocable interpretation. The inspirers of this movement, which

⁶ Guasch, A. (2000). *Los manifiestos del arte posmoderno. Textos de exposiciones, 1980-1995*. Madrid: Akal, p. 7.

eventually made its way into architecture, were Mallarmé, Roland Barthes and Derrida.⁷

Architects such as Rem Koolhaas or Peter Cook (direct referents of the *Utopía* group's work) were influenced by this new relationship between space and philosophy. In the case of Koolhaas, the relationship between utopia and urban configuration is established in the notorious study *Delirious New York*, about New York City. In this book he designates Manhattan as a laboratory of architecture that has created a simulacrum where the utopian discourse is repeatedly embodied in the formal development of the city:

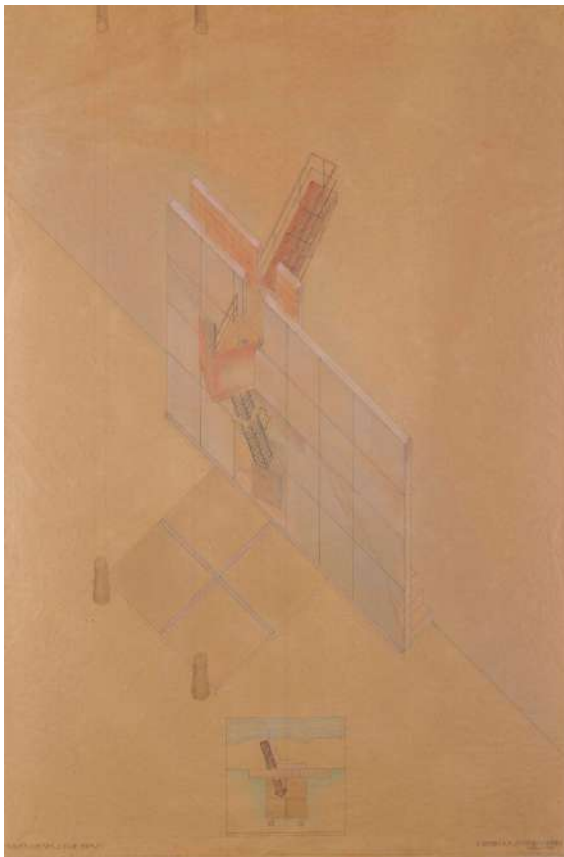
Not only are large parts of its surface occupied by architectural mutations (Central Park, the Skyscraper), utopian fragments (Rockefeller Center, the U.N. building) and irrational phenomena (Radio City Music Hall), but in addition, each block is covered with several layers of phantom architecture in the form of past occupancies, aborted projects, and popular fantasies that provide alternative images to the New York that exists.⁸

Koolhaas's thinking was perhaps one of the strongest influences on *Utopía*'s aesthetic gaze on the city. His thinking is closely related to the notion of fragment and is considered to be part of the deconstructionist movement. It is worth mentioning that the immediate antecedents of deconstruction, both in art and in architecture, can be found in Russian Constructivism, developed during the second decade of the twentieth century by artists and architects such as Vladímir Tatlin and El Lisitski. This movement aimed, through abstraction, to be an art in service of the Russian Revolution of 1917. *Utopía* manifests an interest in this movement through works such as *Monumento a*

⁷ García, R. (2006). *Una revisión de la "Deconstrucción Postmoderna" en arquitectura*. Ph.D. thesis, Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Spain, p. 212.

⁸ Koolhaas, R. (1994). *Delirious New York*. New York: The Monacelli Press, p. 9.

José Martí (Monument to José Martí) (1980), carried out for the *Un arte para los años ochenta* (An art for the eighties) exhibition, held at *La Tertulia* museum. This work combines a political reference to the Cuban hero and poet in Cali, a markedly Colombian left-wing city in the 1960s, with the presence of El Lisitski and Russian constructivism. The *Utopía* group brings into contact the cities of Cali and La Habana through revolutionary architecture resembling the podiums designed by El Lisitski for Lenin. Both the formal closeness with Russian constructivism and the relation between the work referents observed in this work seem to fall under the category of pastiche.



[Fig. 6] Utopía group, From the serie *Monument to José Martí*. *Stairway and river*, 1980, drawing, 92 x 62 cm. Particular collection, Medellín.

The work of *Utopía* can be divided into three decades, characterized by a continuous process of strengthening of the relationship between art and architecture, all the way to the construction of an ‘actual’ architectural project. In the first decade, we observe proposals that, while having an underlying aesthetic discourse, are not part of a consistent and continuous reflection around art. Instead, they deal with circumstantial issues that serve as a pretext to introduce processes and forms of development of architectural projects into the field of art. The second decade is characterized by a marked interest in the relationship between memory and landscape, a frequent theme in works such as *Memorias de viaje Manauare* (Manauare travel memories) (1991), *Memorias de viaje Cali* (Cali travel memories) (1991) and *Paisaje Inédito* (Unknown landscape) (1997). Also, in this second decade, an interest emerges in speculating about spaces that exist only verbally. This new interest is observed in works such as *La Catedral* (The Cathedral) (1992), *Casa verde* (Green house) (1992) and *Fábrica de leche para niños* (Milk factory for kids) (1992), where the group explores spatial and constructive possibilities of places linked to particular political situations and to safety concerns, both nationally and internationally. Finally, the decade between 1999 and 2009 reveals a process of consolidation, where gazes on the territory and geography are constant in their reflection and representation processes. We observe here works containing visual references characteristic of maps, exposing the implications of imaginary boundaries on the territory. Here, it is worth highlighting the work *La ruta del sur* (The south route), carried out in 2005 for the *Archipiélagos* (Archipelagos) exhibition, held at the *Sala de Arte de Suramericana*. In this two-dimensional piece, the group used digital strategies to do a utopian mapping of Latin America. The urban plan of Medellín overlaps the Latin American territory to make a variety of statements, namely architectural, geographical and political. The architectural statements are evidenced in the replicas of the walls of the Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe that are placed at a disproportionate scale on the South American

Pacific coastline, along with artificial constructions on the maritime space. This suggests, on one hand, a relationship between urban planning and project art in architecture and, on the other, a relationship between the expansions onto the sea of coastal cities and configurations of cities within the continent. Geographical statements are, as the work proposes, landforms and boundaries that form a new landscape. Finally, political statements are made by placing planes in formation flying to the south of the continent, which alludes to the trafficking routes used between Colombia and Argentina.



[Fig. 7] Utopía group, *The south route*, 2005, digital printing, 120 x 800 cm. Particular collection, Medellín.

In this last decade, it is also worth mentioning the architectural renovation of *Talleres Robledo*, the current headquarters of the Medellín Museum of Modern Art. This renovation was carried out by the *Utopía* group and it is the only construction actually built by them as an artistic collective. In this place, the utopian elements that have been used in their visual production are materialized in the building design process. This is clearly observed in the digital drawings made before the actual renovation project for the building was underway. In these initial drawings, the group made a series of material speculations both on the facade and on ways to inhabit the indoor spaces. The renovation of *Talleres Robledo* can be seen as the realization of utopian discourse, which is here manifested into a space proposal that houses modern and contemporary art in the city of Medellín. Here the irrational characteristic of utopian proposals is transformed into the rationality of a building renovation where a new set of functions is proposed.



[Fig. 8] Utopía group, Talleres Robledo, *New building Museum of Modern Art of Medellín*, facade, 2009, architectural intervention.

2. Painted architecture and ‘translation’

Juan Antonio Ramírez⁹ has proposed three types of representation in architecture: literary, graphic, or three-dimensional. From this typology, classification criteria can be derived to reflect upon the *Utopía* group's work, particularly their graphic and three-dimension works, since it singles out the types of processes and results obtained.

In the first group, we find two-dimensional works commenting, alluding or appropriating architectural works. This is what is conventionally known as illustrations, which are considered an attempt to copy reality “faithfully”.

⁹ Ramírez, J. A. (1991). *Edificios y sueños. Estudios sobre arquitectura y utopía*. Madrid: Editorial Nerea, p. 28.

However, the illustrations carried out by *Utopía* go beyond reproducing aspects of the visible world. According to Ramírez, this type of representation, inspired in architecture, can be understood in the following terms:

*The fantastic non-disciplinary architectural drawing will also exhibit differences from the feasible drawing or painting, which can be “executed” or at least imagined as part of, or derived from, a project. This latter will include all details and specifications required to realize the three-dimensional actual building, either going through the previous intermediate stage of the models or directly from the drawings.*¹⁰

The members of *Utopía* deviate from the classical notion of illustration. The images produced by them are not used to account for a fragment of reality but for a building or a city landscape through means typical of fiction and utopia. The illustrated, or rather translated, element is an object with functions which are not only aesthetic, but also practical. Thus, they do not merely explore the visible aspects of the referent but also its interpretations in the history of art and architecture. Such is the case of *La ruta del río* (The river route) (1979), a series of colored drawings where some buildings are devoid of their monumental character and are eventually located in figurative contexts allusive to areas of Medellín, specifically those crossed by the city’s river. Additional works that exhibit similar procedures are *Coltejer* (1982) and *Remodelación de un sector del centro de la ciudad* (Remodeling for an area of downtown) (1982). In these works, the extrapolation of realities alien to the landscape of Medellín is the distinctive feature. Thereafter, such extrapolation becomes a permanent operating principle for the artists, a way

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12

to inquire about authorship in an era where all the concepts underlying the notion of artists and artwork have changed.

Secondly, there are the three-dimensional works, which, in the form of sculptures, installations, or models, contain two-dimensional references, so far as they interpret or materialize an image. In this case, three-dimensionality allows the group the use of an icon, its variations of meaning and, above all, its cultural inscription. Interestingly, their three-dimensional works, while reminiscent of an architectural plan, go beyond in its proposals. In the *Utopía* group, the image, usually part of tradition, is not meant to be materialized. In this case, a diagram is not interpreted and materialized but rather, as previously stated, an icon or symbol is commented. This occurs, for example, with paintings or drawings made only with an aesthetic aim. It becomes the crystallization of a fiction, the change from a described and painted architecture to an inscribed and situated architecture. The most emblematic works derived from this procedure include *La isla de los muertos* (Isle of the Death) (1986) and *La catedral* (The Cathedral) (1992).



[Fig. 9] Utopía group, From the serie *Isle of the Dead*. *Right Elevation*, 1986, drawing, 78 x 107 cm. Particular collection, Medellín.

In the former, *Utopía* provides graphical, pictorial, and sculptural interpretations around one of the versions of the Isle of the Dead (1886) by Arnold Böcklin. The plans, drawings and models related to this work stem from an atavistic desire: to expose the hidden side of things. In the drawings, and particularly in the constructed three-dimensional model, a sensitive and intellectual inquiry is observed within the limits of the work being cited. In the latter work, the referent is not art-related, but news-related. Here, the work gives visual embodiment to something which was nothing but a rumor: *La Catedral* (The Cathedral), the famous prison where Pablo Escobar, the drug lord, was detained in the early nineties. Here, something which is not visible has left a verbal trace on the collective imaginary. The artists speculate on what might have occurred in that place of horror, built with words and rumors, parody conventions and, again, extrapolate historical and geographical realities that are part of the canonical repertoire to a local event.

However, intertextual relationships are not exclusively established with the history of art, or architecture, or even current journalism. The projects of *Utopía* can also create autonomous worlds in which the different parts relate to one another. They complement one another and make sense when exhibited together. This occurs in works where two and three dimensional versions, architectural models, scale models, installations and sculptures are produced around the same creative or constructive problem. Consider *La piscina* (The pool) (1989) or *Puente de los vientos* (Bridge of winds) (1989), projects featuring graphic and sculptural versions of something which was never realized, but is articulated through the language used by architecture. The representation strategy becomes the reflection object itself. This leads, firstly, to offset the notion of artwork in Colombia, but also, paradoxically, it leads to an affirmation of the autonomy of artistic ideas and their ability to lucubrate and create self-sufficient realities.

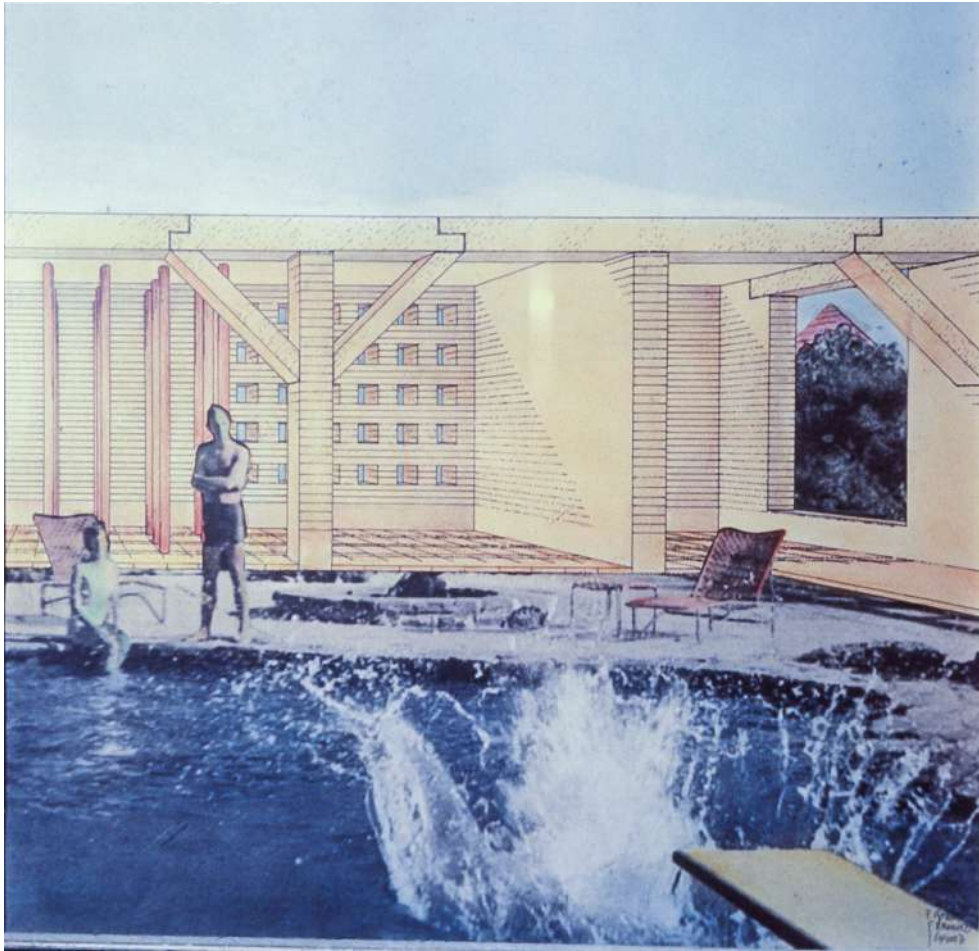
As noted above, these are typically two types of relationships which go beyond the logic of illustration and which, indeed, are part of the broad universe of ekphrasis. The ekphrastic relationship is the result of a particular baseline situation, namely, an artistic milieu commenting on another artistic milieu, though it also involves a collaboration in which traditional conditions, under which authorship is exercised, are modified. The work of *Utopía* can be inscribed into two traditions typical of ekphrasis, which are necessary and important to understanding contemporary art: the issue of sister arts and the aesthetics of the total work of art. The former, as is known, can be traced back to the Horatian statement about the similarities between painting and poetry and is developed in later times, reaching the contemporary art scene. This dialogue may be considered one of the antecedents of the growing interdisciplinarity in the current practice of arts. Responding to a relatively old aspiration in the aesthetic thinking, the second tradition crystallizes in Wagner's vindication of German musical drama and it is crucial to the enthronement of the idea of an open, versatile and pluralistic artwork which has room for a variety of stimuli and formal modes. As will be recalled from the well-known statement by Hal Foster in his essay *The Artist as Ethnographer?*, the contemporary artist is characterized by their ability to navigate through forms, strategies, and formal possibilities as well as techniques to avoid any confinement to a single expressive option.¹¹

With *Utopía*, we are, then, dealing with a milieu that is not subordinated to another. Their work does not involve disciplinary deepening, but rather an articulation of results revolving around an issue or concept. It is, when the relationship between paintings, drawings, sculptures, and installations is considered, a process of translation. This process appeals to symbols,

¹¹ Foster, H. (2001). *El retorno de lo real*. Madrid: Akal, p. 175.

metalinguistic terms and a number of extrapolation strategies activating the latent meanings of the referent, regardless of whether that referential world is imaginary or not. The subject matter requires sometimes one particular milieu and sometimes another. Artworks refer not to buildings but rather to the action of building, to its symbols and ideological possibilities, not to the city, but rather to the way we conceive it, imagine it, and conceptualize it. Again, the approach by Juan Antonio Ramírez is relevant here, since the architectural thought has implicitly accepted that it is an endeavor centered on the activity of a constructor, and has neglected the aesthetic dimension proper of architectural design, where the project is accompanied by texts, images, descriptions and paintings.¹²

¹² Ramírez, J. A. (1983). *Construcciones ilusorias. Arquitecturas descritas, arquitecturas pintadas*. Madrid: Alianza, p. 9.



[Fig. 10] Utopía group, from the series *The river route*. *Mies Walls*. *The confectioner house with "A big splash"* from D. Hockney, 1979, colored photomontage, 40 x 40 cm. Suramericana de Seguros Collection, Medellín.

These consequences, which as mentioned above, might be called ekphrastic, are at a midpoint between the initial conception of the architect and the pragmatic, tectonic and constructive development required by a construction. They are related to the visual-aesthetic thinking of utopianism, which did not always produce visual models to be materialized, but rather produced powerful symbols. Consider, for example, the great exponents of utopian writing, such as More, Bacon, Campanella and Fourier, who, despite proposing spatial organizations and complex urban mechanisms, never

expected a literal execution of their proposals, —with the exception, perhaps, of the phalansteries proposed by Fourier—.



[Fig. 11] Utopía group, from the series *The river route*. Purification plant with Chicago Tribune buildings from Adolf Loos, 1929, colored photomontage, 40 x 40 cm. Suramericana de Seguros Collection, Medellín.

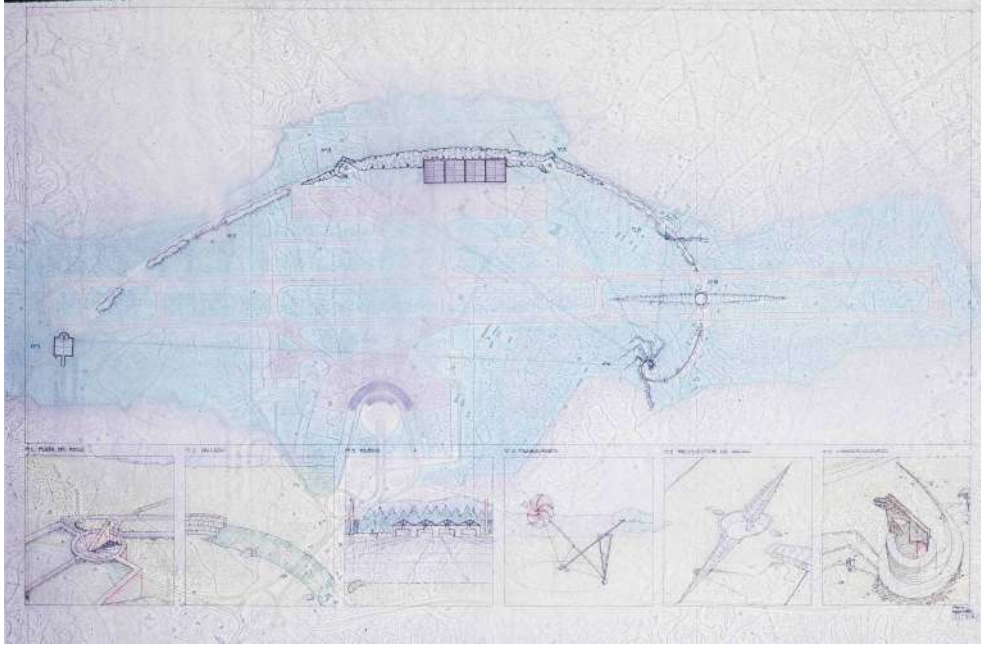
The entire graphic tradition associated with utopia, with illustrations in books, with works of art, appears as referents in the *Utopía* group. Islands, enclosures, and isolated buildings are commonly found in their repertoire.

Conclusion

To conclude this paper, it is worth considering the methodological implications of the analysis here undertaken for the study of art in Colombia and even in Latin America. Most importantly, to consider whether the case of *Utopía*, in its singularity, would lead to infer potential lines of enquiry and analysis about similar or historically related artistic practices. Not necessarily to examine artists interested in similar subject matters — an always feasible enterprise in art history —, but rather because some of the production tactics and strategies used by this collective shed light on a series of particular artistic phenomena. In short, it is important to examine their interest in reflections upon the territory and its representations, recognizing a line of operations which integrate conceptual, technical, and ideological components with the architectural projecting metaphor.

In this regard, based on the way they organize their work, *Utopía* can be considered a landmark group as it largely defines the activity of later generations of artists. In the late eighties and early nineties, the *Utopía* group has been, together with *Taller 4 Rojo*, one of the few artistic collectives making use of teamwork as a relevant factor to articulate their production. Teamwork led to redefining the notion of a work of art, the notion of artistic undertaking, as well as the relationship between a project and a completed work.

Interdisciplinarity is one aspect in which the work of *Utopía* is exemplary of the situations encountered in contemporary art and, therefore, of the demands posed by art forms after modern art, to historians, critics and curators. This facet reveals a group of artists no longer interested merely in deepening a language or a medium, but who rather seek to explore the possibilities of pluralizing resources, as well as authorial viewpoints.



[Fig. 12] Utopía group, *Proposal for José María Córdova Airport*, 1985, drawing, 70 x 100 cm. Particular collection, Medellín.

The work of *Utopía* reveals the prominent role played by artistic interdisciplinarity in contemporary art processes and ruptures with modern art. While this has not traditionally been one of the strongest lines of analysis in Colombian art criticism and art history, it is relevant to find in undertakings such as those of *Utopía*, an operating principle which was later fairly used by artists in Colombia. Strategies that became, long after, usual — shifting from one expression form to another, adding up values from a variety of art forms and languages — can be traced back to *Utopía*. This entails at least two considerations, one about the authorial regime and another about the production strategy. On one hand, *Utopía* introduced collaborative forms of work in Colombian art. On the other hand, by dealing with works articulated around a project or critical revision of a representation, we understand the

wide range of possibilities offered by art forms as well as the way these reveal the primacy of mediation and the interpretive appropriation in art history dynamics.

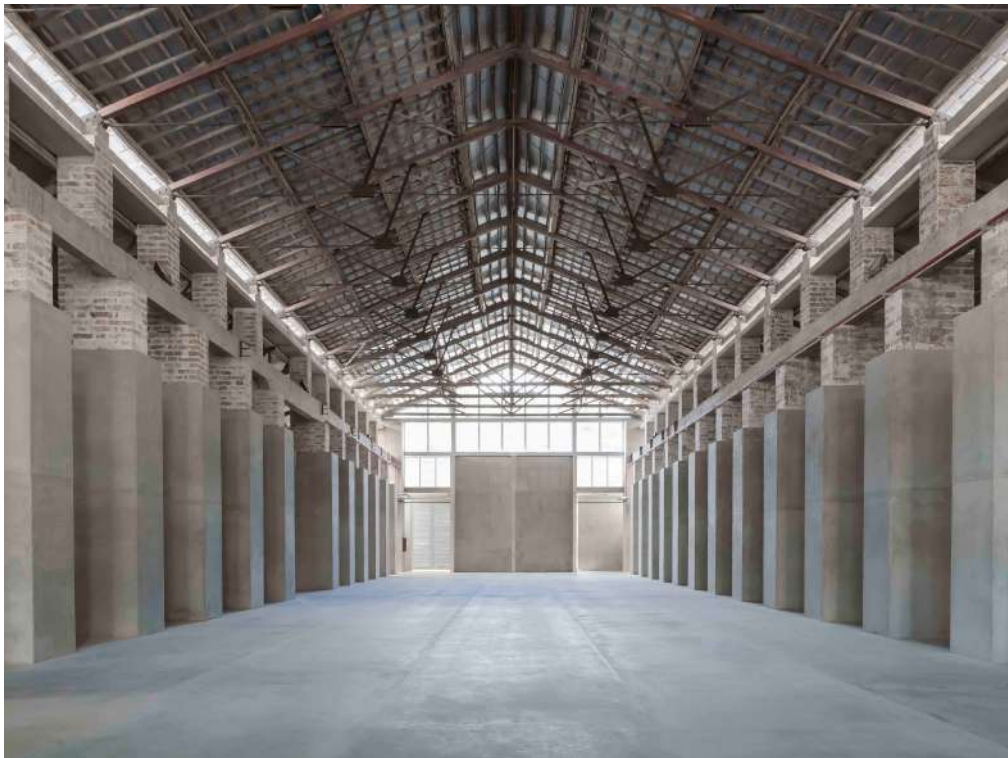
Moreover, the place architecture occupies in the artistic processes of the city of Medellín should be highlighted, a fact fully confirmed when examining *Utopía's* projects. This place is critical rather than discursive, thematic or even technical or formal. Architecture holds a symbolic role, since it is studied as a system susceptible to recreation, criticism and analysis. While the aesthetic playfulness and the imaginative relish appear as distinctive features of the collective's work, their approach to urban phenomena contains a good deal of conceptual challenging. By proposing a review of representations of local and global architectures, the ideological dimension of the phenomenon — its cultural inscription and its reliance on history — is somehow being emphasized.

When art processes in the city of Medellín during the second half of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century are taken into consideration, the centrality that the query urban development and social capital had, and still have, in the local art is confirmed. As we have tried to show here, it is this query which situates *Utopía* in a special position. Two-dimensional symbols of architecture involve other representation systems and operate as a kind of metalanguage, or artifact, of cultural and social criticism.

In this regard, it is important to understand the predominant function that, in projects such as the *Utopía* group, plays the iconographic review of architecture as a way to assert the historical determination of the very artistic practice. This type of review should undoubtedly be further considered when examining art processes that have taken place in different Colombian regions. This seems to entail a different attitude towards artistic behaviors originally

associated either with a return to the figurative order or with sculpture and painting languages. Even though these languages have been previously disdained, in some cases such as with the *Utopía* group, they expand both the operating possibilities and the artistic thinking.

Utopía's work challenges the understanding of the artistic practice in Colombia. Their forms of association, the centrality of interdisciplinarity, the predominance of project-oriented endeavors, and their consideration of the city as a historical, ideological, and aesthetic issue are only some of the possible approaches to the study of a work offering plenty of interpretive possibilities and materializations for Colombian art.



[Fig. 13] *Utopía* group, *Talleres Robledo*, *New building Museum of Modern Art of Medellín*, interior, 2009, architectural intervention.

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