Abstract

The aim of this paper is to consider from a utopian point of view the activities and theoretical positions of Rotor, a collective of architects and designers founded in 2005 in Brussels, which, for the moment, has never explicitly written about utopia. First, we underline how this group is deeply engaged with a question that in the last decades has become more and more crucial for utopian theories and projects: the question of sustainability. We will analyse one of its most recent exhibitions devoted to this topic, "Behind the Green Door", as well a series of examples that show how their work can change our relationship primarily with construction materials, but not only with them. Then, we consider the relationship between this approach and the work of Charles Fourier. We suggest that despite their apparent distance, their proximity becomes manifest when, instead of the stereotypical notion of phalanstère, we look closer into Fourier’s texts and into the crucial role he gives to details. In this perspective, we show how Rotor is valuable to rethink the relationship between architecture and utopia, in coherence [...]
From Rotor to utopia? On Rotor, Fourier and the relation between architecture and utopia

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to consider from a utopian point of view the activities and theoretical positions of Rotor, a collective of architects and designers founded in 2005 in Brussels, which, for the moment, has never explicitly written about utopia.

First, we underline how this group is deeply engaged with a question that in the last decades has become more and more crucial for utopian theories and projects: the question of sustainability. We will analyse one of its most recent exhibitions devoted to this topic, “Behind the Green Door”, as well a series of examples that show how their work can change our relationship primarily with construction materials, but not only with them.

Then, we consider the relationship between this approach and the work of Charles Fourier. We suggest that despite their apparent distance, their proximity becomes manifest when, instead of the stereotypical notion of phalanstère, we look closer into Fourier’s texts and into the crucial role he gives to details.

In this perspective, we show how Rotor is valuable to rethink the relationship between architecture and utopia, in coherence with the most recent critical reflections on both of them.

Keywords: Rotor, Fourier, Sustainability, Details, Exhibitions

1 ROTOR IN NUTSHELLS

Rotor was created in Brussels in 2005 as a collective bringing together professionals from different fields—mainly architects and designers—to work in common projects¹. In many ways, its configuration and work method stands as a new paradigm for architecture firms in a 21st century already marked by world financial crisis such as the one in 2008 and by the decline of the cult of the “starchitect”. First of all, Rotor won’t define itself as an architecture firm per se, seeing that they work in other fields besides architecture, such as research as well as industrial and exhibition design. As opposed to the common model of an architecture firm in which there is a main architect or group that represents it and the rest of the employees that anonymously orbit around it, Rotor functions in a horizontal structure and avoids glorifying any of its members.

The collective has worked in standard architecture projects such as the remodelling of the building for the Galleries Lafayette Foundation in Paris, or the project for the Mode & Design (MAD) museum extension in Brussels² [2]. However, its most renowned projects are its researches and exhibitions, especially the latter ones, which have allowed it to gain recognition in the rising field of architecture exhibition academia. This stems from its novel approach to exhibition design, which it defines as an alternative to museographic displays based on the presentation of documents and materials pertaining to architectural projects, and to “phenomenological” displays that favour the immersion of visitors in a different space, as it is the case with installations. Rotor, instead, wishes to discuss a topic or ask a question through the presentation of everyday life objects. Another important aspect is that its exhibitions aim at being as objective as possible, avoiding value judgments and letting the visitor construct its own opinion of the subject in question. This was evident in Rotor’s contribution for the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2010, which consisted on the presentation of used materials such as an old carpet or wall panels extracted from demolitions. All objects were accompanied by a label with their description and nothing more. Though minimalist in its appearance, this exhibition was actually the result of Rotor’s extended research and analysis on the use and wear of construction materials, available in the catalogue (Rotor, 2012).

Rotor was subsequently selected for curating the 2013 Oslo Architecture Triennial, titled “Behind the
Architecture—Urbanism—Design

Green Door. A critical look at sustainable architecture through 600 objects. This exhibition focused on the question of sustainability through the display of a selection of diverse objects deemed sustainable by their creators. Once again, it avoided a prescriptive point of view. It invited the object’s authors and different specialists to comment on the objects, but the collective itself, rather than imposing its opinion on them, was above all interested in encouraging the visitors to form their own judgment on the topic.

2 UTOPIA, SUSTAINABILITY AND REUSE

“Behind the Green Door” is particularly interesting from a utopian point of view because it questions a topic that is not only at the centre of many political and social debates in the last decades, but also of contemporary thinking on utopia. Indeed, as Jean-Louis Violeau has recently stated, ecology is one of the central themes that composes the utopian horizon in our current context (Violeau, 2013, 77). In relation to this question, this exhibition is important because it constitutes an extremely detailed and diverse catalogue of the different approaches in which architects nowadays are attempting to create sustainable architecture. More precisely, it shows the limits of the discourse developed around the term “sustainability”, an “essentially contested concept” (Rotor, 2014, p. 14) that is not outlined in a clear way and that anyone can interpret differently. Rotor underscores the fact that sustainability cannot be really defined in a scientific way, because it is a political matter that must be confronted as one, without being masked by pseudo-scientific theories that also keep the lay public away from the debate, as it has been so far. In the exhibition’s catalogue, we can see that each project uses the concept of sustainability according to its own rhetoric, with arguments on its favour but also with certain limits. An evident example is Sir Norman Foster’s project for Masdar City, located in Abu Dhabi’s vicinity. A so-called self-sufficient city that one could find rather close to the stereotypical utopian city (but which obviously does not exhaust all forms that utopia can have in architecture) that incorporates the most recent innovations in terms of ecology. Yet, once we look closer it is difficult not to see that the city keeps outside of its walls a series of elements from which it benefits but that do not fit the sustainable category, its airport for example. Rotor even notices that Masdar is in reality an Abu Dhabi neighbourhood instead of a truly independent city.

Even though characterized by their perceptive remarks, members of Rotor do not suggest that we abandon altogether the concept of sustainability. They explicitly refuse the cynical perspective according to which there are no solutions to current climate, social, and political issues, nor any possibility of change. On the contrary, against any resignation, they invite the public to delve deeper into current initiatives and to think of new ones.

For instance, in relation with a fundamental feature of Rotor’s practice—its working with used materials and on existing buildings—we could then mention three related projects. The first is the Vade Mecum for Off-Site Reuse, a manual that begins with the many benefits of reusing materials, which include those in the perspective of the global environment. Its main characteristic is to offer very pragmatic steps that professionals in the building sector, as well as in theory any reader, can undertake to discover, extract, and reuse differently abandoned materials.

“Opalis”, the second project, is an online platform that offers an inventory of companies in Belgium that deal in different ways with used materials, with the purpose of facilitating access to their services.

“Rotor Deconstruction”, finally, is another more recent website in which members of Rotor resell to the general public materials that they themselves have recuperated from demolition sites: generic materials, but also “more exceptional” ones, such as rare pieces by important Belgian designers, many of them not available in the market anymore.

3 Rotor, Fourier and the “Petits Trucs”

Such a way of working could give the impression that Rotor’s approach has nothing to do with a utopian project, at least if we refer to the stereotype that associates utopia and monumentality. However, we want to show that things are more complicated and we can prove it by taking one of the most quoted figures when it comes to utopia and architecture: Charles Fourier. On the one hand, in Rotor’s projects there is nothing that comes close to the images we have of Fourier’s phalanstères, that’s to say the gigantic collective housing building that Fourier envisioned for 1200 people. But on the other hand, Rotor and Fourier are closer than one could think if we approach the latter from a point of view that starts from one of the essential aspects to define his idea of utopia: the role of details.

As Pierre Macherey recently highlighted (Macherey, 2011, 311–317), but also as Roland Barthes had already noticed, Fourier’s way of thinking on utopia is based essentially on his extreme attention to details. First, in the sense that
Fourier’s work is composed primarily of details. In *Le nouveau monde industriel et sociétair*e there are, for example, meticulous descriptions of pear culture, of the proper art of eating soup or of the infinite varieties of cheese (Fourier, 182). Then, because details are essential to the passage from the so-called Civilization, which Fourier despises, to the world of Harmony. Indeed, according to him, the creation of the harmonious world does not depend on a sovereign decision, on a political revolution, or on an institutional or legislative project. It depends on activities that pertain to our daily life and which constitute exemplary actions, which Macherey describes as “petits trucs” (small things) that can change everything, not through a break following a decision, but through a form of “spontaneous contamination”, without the intervention of a centralized power (Macherey, 2011, 454).

In Rotor’s projects we don’t find the affirmation that if we follow its model we will attain the ideal world. However, its approach is undeniably close to Fourier’s in the sense that it gives value to small actions and everyday objects. First, because Rotor is interested in the reuse of elements destined to demolition, a practice that architects have systematically underestimated. Second, because when the collective works on a building, it gives extreme attention to every single component and object in it, taking the effort to imagine new uses for them. For instance, the former marble façade elements from the Social Sciences library in the Université Libre de Bruxelles were transformed into tables. Finally because, as seen in the pavilion for the Venice Biennale that exhibited materials from everyday settings, Rotor encourages the public to change their attitude and their practices: first towards construction materials, but also, in a more general sense, towards all objects that surround us.

4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we want to come back one last time to the open character of Rotor’s exhibitions and activities, which don’t pretend to provide any definitive solutions and are the signs of an ongoing research. We can indeed observe that in this sense Rotor’s approach is perfectly aligned with one of the characteristics that utopia has taken in contemporary times. As Miguel Abensour has frequently highlighted, the most interesting utopian texts, starting from the second half of the 19th century, are characterized by their abandonment of pedagogic and monologic postures (Abensour, 2013). In other words, authors such as William Morris increasingly turn away from precise descriptions of ideal models. They are interested instead, without giving the reader solutions from a presumed knowledge, in inspire in him a utopian impulse, that’s to say to make him think of the possibility of a different world.

In this same way, we do not want to restrict to Rotor’s approach the relationship between architecture and utopia in the contemporary world. However, two aspects in the work of this collective must be highlighted again: the first one is the critical approach that Rotor implements towards projects such as Masdar, which can be read as continuations of an outdated idea of utopia in architecture. The second one is the way that Rotor encourages a new relationship to objects and materials through a deeper attention to details. And even though utopia may take unpredictable ways, it seems to us that these two elements are essential to foresee the relationship between architecture and utopia in the world to come.

NOTES

1 The founding members are Maarten Gielen, Tristan Boniver, and Lionel Devlieger. According to their website (http://rotordb.org), as of February 2016, other partners are Michaël Ghyyoot, Benjamin Lasserre, Melanie Tamm, Renaud Haeringen, Lionel Billiet.

2 For more information on the Galleries Lafayette project, see http://rotordb.org/project/2013_LAF. On the MAD museum, see http://rotordb.org/project/2012_MAD_Brussels.

3 Rotor refers to a series of cases that W. B. Gallie investigated in his essay *Essentially Contested Concepts* (1956).

4 For more information on Rotor position on Masdar project, see Rotor, 2014 (pp. 80, 117, 332–334) and Gielen—Devlieger, 2013.

5 Available at http://rotordb.org/project/2015_Vademecum_Deconstruction.

6 http://opalis.be/.

7 http://www.rotordeconstruction.be/.

8 See Vidler, 2015, for a recent comprehensive study on Fourier’s relationship with architecture.

9 “Peut-être l’imagination du détail est-elle ce qui définit spécifiquement l’Utopie (par opposition à la science politique)” (Barthes, 1971, p. 110).

10 These tables are available in the following Website: http://rotordb.org/project/2008_TableManon.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


