

## ARTH 234 Of Utopias

### Part One: Midterm Paper/Blog Post

**Due:** Friday, March 17

**Length:** 700 words (3 pages)

**Formatting:** 12 pt font, double-spaced

**Image:** On a separate sheet, include a printed image of the utopia you are examining, captioned with creator/builder's name, building/space title, location, materials (if known), and date.

### Choose your utopian project:

Choosing your utopia is an important and intricate first step of this exercise. For this purpose we will hold a workshop on **Wednesday, March 8**. Ideally you will be devoting your final research paper or project to this space as well. Be sure to choose a utopian project/community that speaks to a central topic that seems likely to sustain your interest for the rest of the semester. The space should be one that has not been extensively discussed in class up to this point.

#### Workshop, March 8:

**10:10am – 10:40am. I am Thomas More.** Emulating Thomas More, look at the world around you and identify one aspect of social organization that you deem to be particularly problematic and needs to be rethought of. Resist the urgency to point to all the problems in our world and focus your energies in one or two. Articulate your thoughts in a paragraph of approximately 150 words to share it with your professor. The problem should be one that captures your interest, yet is generic enough to accommodate for speculations.

**10:40am – 11:00am. Here is my Utopia.** Using the resources available to you through our website and the Stevenson Library databases (especially the Utopian Studies Journal), try to locate a utopian project/intentional community that speaks to your main question. Make a list of at least three and locate images for them.

**11:00am – 11:30am. Talk with your professor.** I will be going around the room discussing with each one of you the three images you found and which one you should choose moving forward.

You can always prepare all this in advance of the meeting.

### Guidelines for writing:

Close, careful description is the touchstone of all visual and material culture inquiry. It is built upon the precise and imaginative translation of experiential information into descriptive language. This is an active process that forges the interface between the historical object and your own store of knowledge and experience, and generates questions and problems to be investigated in further research.

As you examine and explore your space, you should engage systematically with each of the categories of observation on the following description checklist. The checklist is designed to help you approach the space slowly and attentively, and to minimize the effect of your own preconceptions on the process of observation. As you write in response to the checklist, remember that writing is not a passive reflection of what you see, but a tool for seeing in the first place.

The checklist process will produce reams of raw notes and observations that will then need to be filtered, edited, polished, and organized into a 2-3 page paper driven by an argument.

Your paper should not address all of the categories. Instead it should offer a descriptive overview followed by an accounting of those few observations that you found most interesting, surprising, or otherwise productive. The ideal paper will show how these different elements relate to each other or give the object an overall physical or visual tenor, but will NOT leap to conclusions that cannot be drawn from the direct evidence at hand. This is not a research paper and this is not the time to try out grand cultural or historical interpretations of the object – that will come later, in your final research project. This paper will simply consist of three pages of vivid, intensive description of your object, organized into a coherent presentation.

After you have spent a good deal of time examining and exploring the space you have chosen to write about, write an analysis of the space based on your observations. Begin by describing the work in basic terms: artist or architect, title, date, and basic subject matter. Then, provide a **thesis**: state what you think this work of art is about and how you plan to support that statement in your paper. Then, support your thesis by way of a visual analysis of the work of art: Analyze HOW the artist/architect (or other agent of space-making) has used formal properties to convey meaning and content, how the parts of the work contribute to the meaning and content of the whole.

Your paper should consist of:

- 1) **The bulk of your paper (2 out of 3)** should consist of a detailed analysis of the relationship between the form and construction of your space, and the social relations that it implements. Some questions to guide you in your observations: What is the layout of the space, and how does it encourage or guide bodies to navigate it? What kind of social structures and relationships does the space organize? And what persons, institutions, or agents continue to

determine the activities that occur within or around the space? (At this stage, you may need to speculate to answer these questions, since you are not performing research yet.) How does the space reinforce established cultural hierarchies of race, class, and gender within the space? Or, if applicable, how does the space work to resist such hierarchies? If you are examining a drawing, critically approach the problem of representation. Who is designing this drawing and for whom? What kind of representational tools does the architect/planner/community leader use? What kind of spectator does the mode of representation assume? For each of these questions, do not just tell us WHAT the space does, but also HOW it does it, grounding these claims in specific visual or structural observations. (**See also** the Checklist for Description at the end of this assignment for guidance)

**\*\*Grammar, spelling, and other measures of rhetorical dexterity will be carefully scrutinized. Edit, edit, and edit again.\*\***

**NOTE:** Your paper should not be your list of observations but an analysis of the relationships between form and social relations, organized to support your thesis statement. Put simply: tell us WHAT the space is and HOW the formal and structural properties of the space contribute to its function and its social meaning.

Grammar, spelling, and other measures of rhetorical dexterity will be carefully scrutinized. Edit, edit, and edit again.

2) **The final (1) page** of your essay should offer an analysis of the space in relation to other utopian communities we have been examining in our class. Begin by asking yourself if your space fits into any of the examined utopian projects. **If it does not, then propose a new category.** You should draw on and cite (using a standard and consistent citation format such as Chicago, MLA, or APA) **at least one** required reading from the course. If we have yet reached the unit covering the spatial typology into which your space fits, you will want to look ahead at the readings for that week for this assignment.

3) **The final paragraph** of your essay should consist of speculations about possible research avenues that have been suggested by your formal/visual/structural analysis. What kinds of larger questions have been raised in the process of analysis? How might you answer them through research?

Do not waste words at this point on introductions, restatements of the assignment, etc. You will be evaluated on the precision and vigor of the language you use to describe the space. Instead of writing: "There is a lot of light in the picture." Write: "The artist has used bright yellow paint, applied in thick, bold strokes, to create energetic and sweeping streaks of light. These come from the upper left-hand corner of the painting and create, like a theater spotlight, dramatic contrasts between areas of light and areas of shadow throughout the picture."

Avoid passive voice unless you are attempting to express some passive quality of the space/building itself. Active verbs help you to establish the dynamics of interrelation among the different parts of the space. You will also want to watch your “to be” verbs: these tend to signal missed opportunities for precision. Restructure the description so that you are forced to think of a more vivid and specific evocation of the object. In the process you will be defining your own response to it more clearly and bringing to mind larger questions, themes and implications.

NOT: “The surface of the photograph is smooth.”

BUT: “The cool, glassy surface reflects the other objects in the room.”

NOT: “The paint is dry along the edges.”

BUT: “Parched paint curls away from the edges.”

Remember that adjectives are not always the best route to precise description. When you use an adjective, ask yourself--HOW? How is the artist/architect/designer conveying this impression or sensation? Again, look for ways to use active verbs to make your description active.

NOT: “There is a curvy line.”

BUT: “An implied line undulates from the upper left of the canvas to the lower right, beginning at the top of the maiden’s head and terminating at the base of the horse’s foot.”

### **A CHECKLIST FOR THE DESCRIPTION PROCESS: ARTWORKS**

Adapted from Jennifer L. Roberts, Department of History of Art and Architecture, Harvard University

Once you have formulated a preliminary idea of the work’s basic content, consider HOW the artist or architect has gone about conveying it. How does the form of the work communicate its content? Or, if a building, how does the structure of the space shape social relations within it? Ask yourself what choices the artist has made with regard to the following categories (where appropriate, depending on the work). Some categories to consider:

**1) Measurement and proportion:** what are the overall dimensions of the object (in both two- and three- dimensions)? Provide precise measurements if possible. What proportional relationships define the object, both in its overall form and among major internal elements?

**2) Materials used:** identify, if possible, all materials used to create the object. If you cannot identify them describe them as fully as you can. Note their patterns of distribution.

**3) Fabrication:** how have the various materials been assembled? Can you determine

the processes used to fabricate the object? (For a painting, this would include questions of paint handling, layering, etc.). Can you determine or make any speculations about what implement(s) the artist used for cutting? Can you determine or speculate from looking alone a sequence or order in which the artist worked?

**4) Line (or cut):** Identify and describe all linear elements and cut edges, actual or implied, in the object. Are lines or cut edges emphasized or deemphasized? Are cuts emphasized or deemphasized? How? What line weights are used? Is there an emphasis on smooth or rough lines (or cuts), short or long lines, nervous or confident lines, choppy or sinuous lines or cuts (etc.)? Where are the prominent horizontal lines? Vertical lines? Diagonals? Are there lines (actual or implied) that connect different parts of the object or different objects represented?

**5) Geometries and formal echoes:** Look for an emphasis or deemphasis on basic geometrical units like circles, triangles, cones, squares, etc. Look for patterns: repeating shapes, nesting shapes, symmetrical arrangements, etc. Identify relationships of scale and number among similar forms.

**6) Organization of forms in 3D space:** For an object: how are forms arranged in actual 3-D space? For a representation: how is 3D space implied, if at all? What about “negative space”?

**7) Color:** Identify (with as much precision as you are able) the different colors used. Then examine saturation and brightness. Examine patterning, distribution, and echoes much as you did with geometrical elements in step 5.

**8) Light:** Where is the lightest light? The darkest dark? For representations: where is the implied light source, and how can you tell? Talk about range, contrast, sharpness or diffuseness.

**9) Representational and textual content:** Produce an inventory of everything represented “in” the image or object. Note and transcribe any text. (For completely abstract objects, this step can be skipped).

**10) Sensory impressions:** what are your own sensory responses, actual or imagined, to the object? Consider all of your senses: hearing, smell, taste, touch, vision. If you are examining a representational image, note your responses to the image as object (i.e., a canvas with oil paint on it) and also project yourself “into” the depicted space and consider the sensory field implied by it.

**11) Mobility and manipulability:** How easy is it to move or manipulate your object (for representations: how easy would it be to move through the space? To move or handle

the objects in it?) What leads you to these conclusions?

**12) Function:** Based on your observations so far, speculate as to the intended function of the object.

**13) User profile or implied viewer:** Based on your observations so far, speculate as to the status and characteristics of the implied user or viewer. (How does the object create its viewer or user?) Is the viewer assumed to be a man or a woman, or does it not matter? An individual or a group? Where is the viewer? What kind of a body does he/she/they have?

**14) Temporal extension:** think about the object's relationship to time. Does it imply or require a narrative or an action? Does it assume that something has already happened? Or that something will happen? Or does it attempt to evoke timelessness? If so, how well does it succeed, and why?

## **A CHECKLIST FOR THE DESCRIPTION PROCESS: ARCHITECTURE**

Adapted from Jennifer L. Roberts, Department of History of Art and Architecture, Harvard University

**Measurement and proportion:** what are the overall dimensions of the building (in both two- and three- dimensions)? Provide precise measurements if possible. What proportional relationships define the building, both in its overall form and among major spaces? What are the main spaces that structure the building? Note these are not necessarily the bigger spaces, there might be small spaces of key importance—if you're looking at a space within a larger building, break it down in smaller areas.

**Materials:** identify, if possible, the most important materials visible in the building. If possible, note their structural behavior: are they holding up part of the building (structure), are they only used as a wrapping membrane (cladding)? Are they somewhere in between? It's ok not to be sure, but try to approximate as much as possible.

**Line:** Look at the plan, section, and elevation of the building, which drawing is the more sticking one? Choose that drawing to identify the linear components. Identify and describe all linear elements, actual or implied, in the object. Are lines emphasized or deemphasized? What line weights are used? Is there an emphasis on smooth or rough lines, short or long lines, nervous or confident lines, choppy or sinuous lines (etc.)? Where are the prominent horizontal lines? Vertical lines? Diagonals? Are there lines (actual or implied) that connect different parts of the object or different objects represented?

**Geometries and formal echoes:** Look for an emphasis or deemphasis on basic geometrical units like circles, triangles, cones, squares, etc. Look for patterns: repeating shapes, nesting shapes, symmetrical arrangements, etc. Identify relationships of scale and number among similar forms.

**Organization of forms in 3D space:** For an object: how are forms arranged in actual 3-D space? For a representation: how is 3D space implied, if at all? What about "negative space"? Try to see if you can move around the building using google maps.

**Color:** Identify (with as much precision as you are able) the different colors used. Then examine saturation and brightness. Examine patterning, distribution, and echoes much as you did with geometrical elements in step 5.

**Light:** How does light come into the building or space? Identify the sources of light (transparency/glass, openings or voids, etc.), the orientation of the building, and its location within the globe (ie, where does light come from? will a space be well-lit or dark in the morning, if it has no openings to the east? will its general illumination change in the winter if it's further north or south of the equator?)

**Representational and textual content:** Produce an inventory of everything represented "in" the building—either looking at photographs or at the plans. Note and transcribe any text. (For completely abstract objects, this step can be skipped).

**Sensory impressions:** what are your own sensory responses to the building? Consider all of your senses: hearing, smell, taste, touch, vision. Project yourself "into" the space and consider the sensory field implied by it.

**Function:** Discuss the program of the building, and the different activities it accommodates.

**User profile or implied viewer:** Based on your observations so far, speculate as to the status and characteristics of the implied user or viewer. (How does the building *create* its viewer or user?) Is the viewer a man or a woman? An individual or a group? Where is the viewer? What kind of a body does he/she/they have?

**Temporal extension:** think about the building's relationship to time. Was it built over multiple stages, did one stage require the destruction of another one? Does it imply or require a narrative or an action? Does it assume that something has already happened? Or that something will happen? Or does it attempt to evoke timelessness? If so, how well does it succeed, and why?