INVISIBLE CITIES: NEW YORK

Lesson 2: Utopias
What is a Utopia?

A Utopia is a seemingly perfect imaginary place. It could be a place of ideal conditions in politics and government; it could be a visionary place where new ideas of living thrive.

Sir Thomas More is credited for coining the term in his 1516 book *Utopia* which describes a fictional island in the Atlantic Ocean. Plato’s *The Republic* is recognized as one of the first writings to employ the idea of a utopia (though not using that term).

Ideal places are evident in many works of literature and film. And some, while imperfect, may present a fantasy world that represent a counter-dream to a current reality--even “Oz” in “The Wizard of Oz,” could be an example of a Utopia--representing a fantastic world ruled by a “good witch” where everyone seems happy.

What other examples of Utopias can you think of that you may have read in a book, or seen in a movie?
ARTIST INSPIRATION: Olalekan Jeyifous

Artist and Architect Olalekan Jeyifous explores ideas related to utopia (and its opposite, dystopia), in his drawings, designs, and installations. In his recent work on display at MoMa, “The Frozen Neighborhoods,” he re-imagines Crown Heights, Brooklyn as a place where climate change is navigated with advanced and hopeful systems, and a historically Black neighborhood has retained agency of its places and spaces.

Task:

Learn about “The Frozen Neighborhoods” by visiting the MoMa site.

https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/312/4042

You can also view Jeyifous’ other work by visiting his website. The following is a link to digital collages that reimagine African shantytowns:

PROJECT: Create your own New York Utopia

Begin by reflecting on ideas of utopia and dystopia in your own surroundings. In a notebook, take time to answer the following questions:

1. How is dystopia represented in the city? Think about difficult living conditions in the city, or examples where great improvements are needed. For example, do all communities have equal access to quality foods? Are there places where people cannot get clean water? Are conditions of space so tight in certain places that one might desire a larger living quarter or access to outdoor space?

2. When you think of an ideal place, what do you envision? This could be related to equity (or fairness), government policies, economy, or even something fantastic—perhaps you dream of swimming pools and living on clouds. Take time to truly dream about a “perfect” place for living.

3. What neighborhood, block, or place in New York would you most like to transform into a utopian ideal?
The Utopia you envision could follow the model of Olalekan Jeyifous and be a complex configuration of a city, imagining new waterways and systems of accessing resources, or it could be represented more simply. For example, in the photo on the left, you can see a home in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, painted a bright blue color, with a yard decorated by flowers and a small palm tree--as if the home is in the Caribbean and not in a wintry Brooklyn. In a way, the owner of this home has idealized a place that belies the gray of the city, and celebrates with summer flora and color (at the odds of a dying winter season, when this photo was taken). In the photo on the left, we see an image of a “flying horse” in Chinatown. While not necessarily representing a utopia, there is something fantastic about walking through Chinatown at night and coming across this street sculpture. Perhaps your project can incorporate a dream-like element that transports people to an imaginary place.
After reflecting on your notebook questions, decide on a specific place in New York that you would like to change from dystopia to utopia, or a place you would like to modify to make it more habitable, more dream-like, or more interesting. Then, find a photo of your selected place.

Next, you will create a new place on-top of this existing place. You can do this several ways: You can use photoshop, illustrator, or an ipad program to create a digital drawing. Or you could trace the existing place and draw or paint a new place by analog drawing or painting.

The next slides will demonstrate how you can approach both of those techniques.
If you choose to draw by pen or pencil, you can use these simple tracing methods. The first 2 images on the right show you how you can simply place your image on a window, and use daylight to trace. (be sure to use a soft pencil to trace). Alternatively, you can use a light-pad (on the left) for tracing. (There are brands available for under $30.)
In this example, I used Photoshop to add a swimming pool on a rooftop. I found an image I had taken of a wide open pool in Las Vegas, and simply cropped out the water, and added it to the photo I had taken of the buildings covered in graffiti. This is just a simple addition, but try adding more elements to your utopian image. For example, if you wanted to expand on this rooftop paradise, you might also add trees, chairs, floating toys, etc. Or perhaps you can find a way to make a statement about the scarcity of water, or access to such luxuries as swimming pools.

To learn how to merge images in Photoshop, you can see the following tutorials:

In this example, I used an ipad to draw on-top of an existing photo. Like the turquoise house in Brooklyn, you could use color as a statement. Drawing directly on the photo is also a way to be playful, and to experiment with different visions.
When you have finished your artwork, take time to think about these questions.

REFLECTIONS:

1. After viewing Olalekan Jeyifous’ “Frozen Neighborhoods,” in what ways did you connect with his work?

2. After creating your own utopia, do you feel compelled to find ways of living that might make this dream world come to life?

3. Share your artwork with one other person. Ask them if this is a place where they would like to live. Then ask yourself the same question--would you want to live in the place you created? Why or why not? Is there anything that could make it even better?