

ATINER CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES No: ARC2013-0732

**Athens Institute for Education and Research**

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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series**

**ARC2013-0732**

**The Phalanstery Paradigm**  
*Paradoxes of Architectural Determinism*

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URL Conference Papers Series: [www.atiner.gr/papers.htm](http://www.atiner.gr/papers.htm)

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**ISSN 2241-2891**

8/11/2013

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This paper should be cited as follows:

**Dragos Dascalu, S., Ionescu, S. and Balan, T. (2013) "The Phalanstery Paradigm. *Paradoxes of Architectural Determinism*" Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: ARC2013-0732.**

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**Abstract**

Architecture has been used for social purposes since the dawn of man, but it was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that it was consciously used by architects and utopians as a tool for social change. It was then that it was invested with the role of bringing a new society into reality, and its main example is the *phalanstere* conceived by social theorists such as Charles Fourier or Victor Considerant. A new architectural paradigm that obsessed architects for generations to come was created. Le Corbusier and his *Unite d'Habitation*, Ginzburg and Milinis and their *Narkomfin* Building are all based on the phalanstery paradigm having the explicit objective of changing the world through architecture. Even today, the paradigm still has its examples, such as New Urbanism developments or experiments in housing such as the *Sociopolis* project. This paradigm was characterised by Maurice Broady in his 1966 essay *Social Theory in Architectural Design* as **architectural determinism**: "architectural design has a direct and determinate effect on the way people behave (...) it suggests that those human beings for whom architects and planners create their design are simply molded by the environment which is provided for them". Although proven to be a form of reductionism, the paradigm never lost its appeal. This article will try to answer the question: what if it had worked? What would society and ordinary life be like if the specific effects of their architecture had been in fact achieved? Would society be better or worse?

**Keywords:**

**Acknowledgement:** This paper was supported by the project “Improvement of the doctoral studies quality in engineering science for development of the knowledge based society–QDOC” contract no. POSDRU/107/1.5/S/78534, project co-funded by the European Social Fund through the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources 2007 - 2013

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All human activity is localized. Therefore, it was not impossible to think (and it still isn't), that human action and behavior has a certain relation to the space in which it is situated. But from this basic observation to the conclusion that human action can be determined in specific ways through the design of specific spatial configurations there is a long way, and architects with a social purpose have often walked along this path. Throughout history, the role of architecture in determining specific actions and behaviors has been invested with highs and lows. Architects, social reformers, power holders have given either too much importance to the role of architecture in this matter or too little. But as Solinis (2005) and Powers (2008) have argued, until the Renaissance, this relation was generally the other way round: it was not the urban or architectural form that determined a specific behavior or action; instead it was society, as it was or should be reflected in constructed form. These were the original utopias, Plato's *Atlantis*, Morus' *Utopia*, Christine de Pisan's *Cite des Dammes*. Starting with the Renaissance, this paradigm started to shift and architects were at the front. Filarete's *Sforzinda* is a symbol of this shift. It is here that the perfect society is no longer reflected in the perfect city or building but the other way around. The perfect city will create the perfect society. *Sforzinda*'s perfect geometrical form and absolute order was supposed to bring around the perfect society. What this society is in fact and how it looks like is no longer clear. As Mumford (1961) argued in *Sforzinda*, the institutions no longer generate urban form, as the church, town hall or royal palace had done in the past. The role of the newly designed urban form is to reflect the will of the prince and his architect into these institutions and into their subjects.

Although this way of thinking has accompanied architectural practices with social purposes since the Renaissance, it was not until the 1960s that it received a proper definition. Broady (1972, [1966]) has called it architectural determinism:

*'Architectural design has a direct and determinate effect on the way people behave. It implies a one-way process in which the physical environment is the independent, and human behavior the dependent variable. It suggests that those human beings for whom architects and planners create their design are simply molded by the environment which is provided for them. It is of a kind with the other varieties of popular determinism – such as the view that national character is determined by climate – which save the layman the trouble and worry of observing accurately and thinking clearly'* (p.174)

Broady used this term to describe the way that British architects conceived residential areas, thinking that certain spatial configuration had specific, determined effects on the behavior of the individuals living there. It was a critique of Perry's 1920s concept of the neighborhood unit as it was applied in the United Kingdom after World War II. Yet, Perry's neighborhood unit is only one example of deterministic thinking in architecture. Architectural modernism

is filled with such examples: Le Corbusier, Ernst May, Moisei Ginzburg, etc. Most of these architects were inspired by or even entirely adopted the thinking of the socialist utopians of the XIXth century. These utopians were among the first who considered and actually built the perfect buildings, which were supposed to bring about the perfect society. With this aim in mind, they conceived a model of a perfect building, whose principles formed a veritable paradigm in architectural thinking concerning the relation between society and architecture.

### **The Phalanstery Paradigm**

The *phalanstère* of the socialist utopians of the XIXth century, such as Charles Fourier, Victor Considerant, Robert Owen is to be considered a new paradigm (Kuhn, 1966), in thinking about the relation between architecture and human behavior. It attracted a quite impressive number of followers in architecture and it provided enough principles to be adapted in various buildings and in different forms. It is these common architectural principles that can be generally considered to form an architectural paradigm.

Merckle (2006) argues that in the case of Fourier, the phalanstery is a true social laboratory in which he could have tested his social theories. Fourier imagined the perfect society and then built its palace. We consider this distinction of particular importance. The principles which Fourier applied in his phalanstery came from his social ideals, out of his vision of a perfect society. The architects who took and applied his principles, as we will show, did not have a vision of a perfect society in mind: they applied the principles only in form and hoped for a better society, even though they didn't know how this society would look like. This is why we consider it a paradigm for thinking space and not a paradigm of understanding society.

The architectural principles of the phalanstery, as they are revealed by Fourier or Victor Considerant, which were later adopted by architects are:

1. The phalanstery is a perfect, finished and finite building. In order to bring about a perfect society, the building could not be anything less of perfect. Its perfection is mentioned through its title, the combination of the *phalanx*, the symbol of perfect cooperation between individuals (8 – 16 – 32 individuals), and *monastère* (monastery), a symbol of divine spatial and functional order, if we are to consider St. Benedict's *Ora et Labora*. One effect of this characteristic is that the phalanstery could not be extended. It housed 1600 – 1800 residents and no more and it could only be replicated. Following this idea, Le Corbusier (1986) described architecture, and his architecture in particular, as a science reflecting the perfection of nature. His apartment buildings were to be considered machines for living in a period when machines were considered the symbol of perfection. Moisei Ginzburg (1982) talks about architecture as a science and a machine as well while Clarence Perry (1929) defines the perfect neighborhood unit model to be replicated in any and all circumstances. All these designs were considered perfect by their authors, with



nothing to add or subtract, with nothing left to chance or another individual just as the phalanstery.

2. In order to function as a laboratory for his social experiments, Fourier isolated the phalanstery from the environment. Being finite and perfect buildings, its limits must be clearly defined. Merckle (2006) presents this specific issue extensively, defining the situation as a 'moral quarantine'. For once, the phalanstery was placed far away from the city. Access was not forbidden for visitors but they were kept either outside the building, near the left wing of the main building, either in a 'cellular field' above the last floor of the building. The phalanstery had to be 'transparent but impermeable'. In the same manner, Corbusier's *Unite d'Habitation* in Marseille, for example, has a triple isolation from the city: it is placed at the periphery, in a park and detached from the ground (see fig. 2). Its residents are protected from the evil of society.

3. One of the main features is the recreation of streets and street life on the interior. The corridors of the phalanstery are lit and heated. As Fourier wrote: 'The cold cannot be felt inside the phalanstery (...) We can go to the workshops, ball rooms, and reunions without the need for coats and boots' (cited in Ragon, 1986). This is the most often replicated feature of the phalanstery. The *Unite d'Habitation*, the *Narkomfin* building or Park Hill Residence in Sheffield, all have these interior streets, specifically designed with the same social purpose. People must meet and use these perfect interior streets just as they did the streets of the city. But by this action, public space came extremely close to the private space of the apartments, losing thus a lot in what concerns privacy of the individual.

4. Functionally, the phalanstery combined work and housing in the same structure. The purpose was that the entire day of the individual was determined through the project. Furthermore it assured a perfectly efficient use of the individual's time. Idleness could not be accepted as it could have unforeseen effects. The phalanstery had to have:

*'sumptuous and modest apartments so that everyone can benefit according to his tastes and good fortune; - then workshops must be distributed for all types of work, rooms for all industrial functions and pleasure activities'* (Considerant, 1848, p.56)

5. For efficiency and social purposes, a good part of domestic functions such as cooking and washing were externalized in common spaces called '*seristeres*'. Complete efficiency and control in the residents' daily activities was therefore assured. This feature was extensively used by Corbusier and Ginzburg in their buildings. In the *Narkomfin* building, the apartments did not have a kitchen. The building had adjoined a self-service restaurant to serve all the residents.

In conclusion, the principles of the phalanstery, developed as a laboratory for the experimentation of Charles Fourier's social theory, were the fact that it had to be a perfect building, finite, with clear borders, isolated in order to

constitute a 'moral quarantine'. Functionally, it combines working and housing in the same structure and it tries to externalize most of the private functions in common spaces. These principles were consciously adopted by architects and used in order that their buildings could achieve some form of social order.

But people did not obey these rules and consciously changed their environment so that it suited them. Also, it is now clear that the phalanstery did not create the perfect society that the social utopians of the XIXth century envisioned. Considering that so many architects adopted the phalanstery paradigm, our question is: would society truly be better if most of its built environment were based on these principles, and people obeyed the rules created through the architectural project?

### **Paradoxes of Architectural Determinism**

The society envisioned by the socialist utopians of the XIXth century and the architects of the early XXth century was better than the existent one. Everyone had all that he/she could need. Work was provided for everyone; there were no problems related to gain, wealth, and social inequality. It was a perfect climate for the development of individual freedom. Still, the architectural principles we have mentioned would in fact have denied in some manner the appearance of such a society. There is therefore a paradox: even though these buildings and spaces were conceived in order to bring a better society into existence, the paradox is that it would have created a more repressive society.

Firstly, the perfection and completeness of the buildings do not permit individual or collective changes in time. This limits the individual's agency. The paradox is that in the society created, the individual has in fact very little control of his own space. As a general rule, as Baltazar (2010) argues, 'the more structurally determined, closed, finished and restrictive the space is, the more difficult it will be for people to use it differently from the intended plan and to initiate social transformation'. For example, closing a balcony or modifying a façade orientated towards the street could destroy the idea of perfect visibility between neighbors and thus, the idea of mutual surveillance needed for the security of the ensemble or building. Building a private kitchen in the *Narkomfin* building would make the common kitchen useless and thus, its social purpose will be put in peril. These actions were not acceptable, and thus, they were forbidden. As Ginzburg (1982) put it:

*'There is no part or element of the machine that does not occupy a particular place, position, or role in the overall scheme and that is not the product of absolute necessity. There is not and cannot be anything in the machine that is superfluous, accidental, or "decorative" in the sense conventionally applied to habitation. Nothing can be either added to or taken from it without disrupting the whole. What we encounter in the machine, essentially and*

*primarily, is the clearest expression of the ideal of harmonious creation' (Ginzburg, 1982)*

Limiting the agency of the individual could have been a perverse effect of concentrating on the individual's private life, trying to control it. The individual's entire everyday life is designed and the architect teaches each and every one how to live his/her life (Leger, Panier, 2005). People 'mess up things, they have problems, ideas, love, hate, emotions' and master plans have no place for the liberty of individuals (Oldenburg, 1999). Sennett (2007) argues that the effect of over-determination can be felt today by the way cities are designed as general practice. We can therefore imagine how the buildings based on the phalanstery paradigm, which tends to determine all aspects of the individual's life, would have affected the individual. For Sennett, the result is *The Brittle City*, a closed system based on equilibrium and integration in which every part of the design is a section of a larger scheme. In the Brittle City all the things that do not fit in the larger scheme are diminished in value and importance up until the point when all the things that do not fit are considered to be offensive, provocative, dangerous, and thus must be repressed and eventually eliminated. But elimination also means eliminating certain users.

Secondly, the phalanstery paradigm supposes an 'ideal user', already existent or to be created by the building or urban design. Be it the socialist or communist 'new man' as in the case of Ginzburg's *Narkomfin*, or the perfect collaborative and altruistic neighbor in Perry's neighborhood unit, or even the perfect physical dimensions described in Corbusier's *modulor*, all users are ideal users and the project is designed and built based on and for this ideal user. Deviation is impossible and unacceptable. Furthermore, the paradigm supposes that the solution is universal. The recipe for generating sociality is applicable to any and all environments with the same result. Le Corbusier (1986) argued that the standard is the only reasonable solution for architects and architecture:

*'A standard is established on sure bases, not capriciously but with the surety of something intentional and of a logic controlled by analysis and experiment. All men have the same organism, the same functions. All men have the same needs. The social contract which has evolved through the ages fixes standardized classes, functions and needs producing standardized products.'* (p.136)

Some New Urbanism neighborhoods or even Corbusier's *Unite*, buildings and urban designs based on an ideal user have in fact attracted only ideal users. The effect is therefore that these spaces are more or less socially homogenous. Instead of a social housing project, the *Unite* has become a magnet for middle-class or upper middle class individuals, which share more or less Corbusier's ideals (Hussell, 1997). As Podobnik (2002) shows in his studies on Orenco Station, a New Urbanism development, that 95% of the population is white with an income around 6000 – 7000 \$/month. Furthermore, he shows that people came here especially because they wanted to live in a dense community

with a lot of social interactions. This reveals that the population there is not only homogenous in terms of race and income, but they are all community-oriented individuals so they share the same frame of mind. We can therefore imagine that building for the ideal user will either attract people who are more like the ideal user or who will become the ideal user in time. Social homogeneity will surely follow. The users of these buildings become generic individuals or, as Ritzer (2010) calls them, non-persons.

Standardization, on the other hand, and the universality of the solution, must be based on 'objective' data and information. It is the only way for creating a stable, predictable, efficient, easily quantifiable space. Ritzer (2010) has defined these type of spaces as 'mcdonaldized' spaces and he associates them with the concept of 'nothing'. 'Nothing' is a social form which lacks significant content, is controlled by the center and is always dependent on a top-down decision. In a space characterized by 'nothing' there are always non-persons, persons which are characterized more by their functional role and are treated accordingly, and not as persons. It is a generic individual and interaction with these persons is based on a predetermined scenario. The individuals in Perry's neighborhood unit or Hillier's models of urban design based on the space syntax models (2005, 2007) count as long as they fulfill their place is the machine: mutual surveillance and being in an altruistic mood, helping their neighbors when they need it. In predictable environments individuals create expectations regarding the behavior of others. As Goffman (1990, 1968) argued, this kind of expectation leads to the actual action of others. They will comply with the social situation created by the architect. If not, they can be marginalized or even excluded. The individuals comply with a certain scenario of interaction.

Therefore, the paradox of the phalanstery paradigm is that it creates a socially homogenous society in which individuals behave according to certain scenarios. Creating a better society would in fact mean that this society is de-humanized and lacks the sociality and the sociability of the current one.

Thirdly architecture based on the phalanstery paradigm creates 'Laboratory Architectures'. The main idea of any laboratory is controlling the environment. It is here where the isolation from the environment, done through the creation of borders, and the high control of the individual's everyday life is most important.

As Boudon (1989) explains, the degree in which a system is determined depends on the size of the system and the time span in which the processes wish to be determined. This is done through creating a limit and an isolation from its immediate environment, strengthening the idea of exclusion of most individuals. Isolation is done through the construction of boundaries (Sennett, 2011). After the boundary, a species cannot exist, and others cannot enter. Isolation is done, as in the case of the phalanstery, by building it at a considerable distance from the city, meaning a distance from other individuals. For the *Unite d'Habitation* isolation is achieved through building it at the periphery of the city, in a park, mounting it up on piers, afar from the potential threat of the passer-by. This assures the protection of the 337 apartments from

unwanted visitors. But the visitors, just as in the phalanstery, were not completely excluded. They were kept at a safe distance but in visual range, in a hotel inside the building, but quite separated from the other residents. Perry (1929) isolates the neighborhood unit by placing a motorway around the neighborhood and commercial functions at the margins, so that the center, which contains the houses and the community center, is better protected. These limits make sure that the system cannot grow and therefore its contingency cannot increase. It means that the initial rules established for the whole will not need further adapting. At the same time it means that other people cannot benefit from its qualities, being therefore excluded. Only 3000 individuals can benefit from the new social and spatial order of the *unite d'habitation*, the rest being excluded. There is a paradox of building a new society – most if its individuals are excluded. The individuals inside will lose contact with the individuals outside, leading eventually to a form of tribalism in the city (Sennett, 2012; Pagel, 2012). As Hillier and Hanson (2005) argued, a democratic society can only be based on large communities with a dense network of interaction spaces and urban areas which are open globally and locally, distributed and non-hierarchical.

By limiting private space on the other hand, and putting private functions in common spaces, the individual is at most of the time in someone else's visual range. The whole life of the individual is easier to control, as unwanted behaviors can be more easily spotted and punished. This was the idea of Godin's *familistere* and the phalanstery but of Hillier's Space Syntax method as well. The paradox is that building the perfect society not only creates a scenario of behavior; it also reinforces it through mutual control. For the society to work, individual freedom must be drastically limited, the individual must be de-humanized, society de-socialized and also, it must be completely homogenous.

### **The Phalanstery Paradigm – An Attraction for Power-Holders**

A homogenous society, de-socialized, de-humanized, with a limited freedom for the individual was also the purpose of all totalitarian regimes. Therefore, it is no surprise that the phalanstery paradigm was always seductive to power-holders. We consider that the most important illustration of the paradoxes of the phalanstery paradigm is the fact that even though the spaces conceived on this paradigm were supposed to create the perfect society, more egalitarian and democratic, the principles were used by power-holders in order to educate and control individuals.

The most important and clear example of how the phalanstery paradigm was used by power-holders in order to strengthen the control over the individuals private life and freedoms, and achieve social homogeneity is the *Narkomfin* building, designed by Moisei Ginzburg and Ignaty Milinis in 1928. It is here where the principles of the phalanstery meet Trotsky's (1976) directives of creating the 'new man'. The *Narkomfin* is a perfect expression of

architecture in the service of a totalitarian regime and a tool of bringing forth the 'new man'. It was a building commissioned by N.A. Miliutyn, the commissary of finance in the new Soviet state. The apartment building was conceived as two volumes articulated through a skywalk at the first floor, mounted on piers, which was supposed to house 50 families (200 individuals) in three typologies of apartments. At each third level there was an interior street, heated, which could become a place of interaction for individuals (Curtis, 2005). The smaller building contained all the common functions: a self-service restaurant, kitchens, nursery, and a library. It is a combination of dense housing and collective functions, alongside gardens and open public spaces.

The Narkomfin building tries to eradicate the traditional way of life; it imposes a new way of thinking and living in which the individual counts only in what concerns its biological functions. What matters is the collective, which has the most generous spaces. Most of the functions, which are regularly found in the private space of the apartment, are moved and transformed into collective spaces. Thus, Miliutyn uses the paradigm with the help of Ginzburg and Milinis, in order to control the residents, make them change their old way of life, become perfect citizens of the new communist society. However, the purpose of the building is firstly that of bringing forth a new society through the modification of the home of the citizen. Humphrey (2005) argues that this policy of building communal dwellings was one of the strategies used by the Soviet State for controlling the population and creating the 'new man'. We, therefore, see how architecture is used to model power, to materialize and make it sensible and epidermal (Mihali, 2011).

## **Discussions**

The phalanstery can be considered an architectural paradigm, especially for architects who assign themselves a social mission. For them, these principles were supposed to be tools to create a perfect society, egalitarian, sociable, altruistic, cooperative.

We argued that, although envisioned for a good purposes, the phalanstery, if it would have functioned strictly according to its principles, would in fact have had negative consequences: limitation of the individual's agency, perfect control of the daily lives of individuals, a totally controlled, predictable, and efficient environment, which eliminates surprise, and creates a totally homogenous society. Totalitarian power-holders (and maybe not only) saw these negative effects when they resorted to the same principles, with the complicity of architects. They thought they could ensure a perfectly disciplined and obeying individual through spaces designed on the phalanstery paradigm. Here is the perverse effect of the phalanstery paradigm and architectural determinism – the perfect society cannot be created in this manner without enslaving the individual. Fortunately, like in any form of deterministic thinking, everyday lives of individuals tend to be more complex so that these

effects have rarely appeared. As in the Narkomfin building, people tend to differently appropriate and express themselves tactically.

Still, the paradigm lives on. Projects such as Vicente Guallart's *Sociopolis* at the Valencia Bienalle prove that the phalanstery paradigm still has supporters today. What could be the reason for still using these principles even though they generally do not work, and if they did, society would not be better but worse? Is it what Broady (1972) thought? That architects just want to demonstrate that they are a critical profession to society; or as Sudjic (2010) thought, that architects are obsessed with control? Whatever the reason, the need for less control by the architects regarding built space in general and public space and residential space in particular might not only be something desirable, but necessary.

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