

Giancarlo De Carlo's Realistic Utopia

Critical Counter-Images within an Architecture of Participation

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To seek a possible means to navigate the apparent divergence between participation and criticality in architecture, this paper returns to the notion of the “realistic utopia,” developed by one of the leading early exponents of participation, the Italian architect, urbanist, writer and educator, Giancarlo De Carlo. Through a close reading of De Carlo’s principal theoretical works on participation, in this paper it is argued that the realistic utopia offers a distinct conception of the interaction between architectural objects, the processes by which they are formed and the societal structures which frame this formation. It shows that beyond being a means to understand the multi-directional relationship between architecture

and society, the realistic utopia offers a conceptual tool to aid action within the complex set of forces at work in this relationship. In this way, it locates the realistic utopia as something of importance beyond an assessment of the work of De Carlo, or even the broader project of participation he fostered, and is here opened up for renewed use by practitioners today.

The Critical Limits of Participation

A former public works depot in Sydney, now a field of concrete ringed by cyclone fencing. Across the road, in the offices of an arts organization, we meet with people who live around the field or have some connection to it. The field will soon be gone, replaced by new apartment buildings in an area once industrial, now the densest residential area in the city. The local government will require the developer to create a new public space here. That's why we are here, being paid to speak to these people and come up with some ideas of what this public space could be. A lot of people view us with suspicion. Our activities are a fig leaf to overdevelopment. We are the midwives of gentrification. We ask people about this place and discuss how it could be. A lot of people just want the site to remain as it is: an absence, a ruin, a pause. We put all this in our report.

Across town, some red-brick blocks line the harbour. Here we are also being paid to speak to people, this time by a community housing association and this time about making concrete improvements, not just suggestions. The housing association has obtained a small grant to establish a community garden. Some people are interested in gardening, others prefer reading or drinking cups of tea. According to the budget, we design a set of planter boxes with various seats and tables incorporated. Just across the water, a much larger community of public housing has just been emptied out and sold off by the state government. People in these red-brick blocks are uncertain how much time they have left before their homes too are sold.

Closer to the beaches, in a leafy street of terrace houses, we have another project, this time without anyone to speak to. The project is a proposition in the form of artefacts, built in an art gallery. A huge colonial map covers one wall: taciturn assessments of agricultural viability replaced by hyperbolic real-estate tag lines. It is a map for a fictional movement, one where the legal fiction of terra nullius has been made permanent—you own what you occupy, and only as long as you occupy it. We have designed a flexible housing typology for this movement, built at 1:1 scale. The exhibition lasts a few months, is packed away, and stored under my parents' house.

These three projects illustrate, in different ways, a central problem within my own practice regarding the limits of what can be called participatory architecture. For almost twenty years I have been pursuing works of

1 While it can be argued that the central idea of participation has existed in various forms throughout history, Peter Blundell Jones has proposed 1968 as the moment in which the concept became widely used in its modern form. Peter Blundell Jones, "Sixty-eight and after," in *w/w/e/d/s*. Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till (Abingdon: Spon Press, 2005), 127–39.

architecture, art and research which collectively fall under this category. In the projects undertaken by myself and my collaborators, we have sought to question who is able to participate in the making of the city and why others are not included. Over this period, questions have begun to emerge regarding the efficacy of our practice. Colleagues have raised questions about the actual effects of our involvement in the projects we work through, such as the development of a new public space as part of a major redevelopment in a rapidly gentrifying area. Our participatory process has been perceived as a tactic to dissipate opposition, employed by those profiting from the transformation of a former working-class and public housing area. At the same time, we would be undertaking much smaller projects for specific communities of public housing residents. In this context, the budgets and timeframes and scope of works were so limited that asking questions of the broader housing system appeared to be a fruitless exercise. We began to question our own work: What good were planter beds to people who may lose their home in a few years? What good is collaboratively designed public space if it contributes to the ongoing displacement of existing communities?

There was an increasing sense in which our efforts were futile, or even counterproductive. Yet the alternative, to simply say no, to stop participating, did not seem to resolve the issues. Someone else would simply take our place and the process would roll on. Perhaps in response to the limitations to asking critical questions within a practice of participation, we began to work on entirely speculative projects that looked at the question of participation on a larger, systemic scale. While these projects were featured within a gallery context, at times constructed as 1:1 artefacts, they remained as speculations, unable to reach beyond the limits of the gallery walls, or preach beyond the choir of audience who cared to visit. They operated on the level of a sign, communicating a possibility rather than enacting it. The "participatory" projects in which we were engaged were able to enact some level of real change, but only within a restricted and largely pre-determined frame. The "speculative" projects were unlimited in the frame of reference that they explored, but were unable to affect anything in the real world. The strength of each seemed to be the weakness of the other. Through these experiences, two interconnected questions began to form: How could a practice of architecture concerned with issues of participation maintain criticality towards the system in which it operated? How could speculative practices which foregrounded their critical relationship towards systems of power operate with any efficacy in the real world?

These questions, which had begun to cause discomfort in my own practice, exemplify a much wider questioning of participatory practices within the discipline of architecture. For more than fifty years, the idea of "participation" in architectural practice has been a potent concept for architects looking to reshape their profession's social significance.¹ The notion that the people who use the built environment should be

- 2 Miessen's critique is expounded over a series of publications. The most extensive is Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation: Crossbench Praxis as a Mode of Criticality* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010)
- 3 For example: Manipulative: Sherry Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 4 (July 1969): 216–224; Populist: Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, "In the Name of the People; The Populist Movement in Architecture," in *What People Want: Populism in Architecture and Design*, ed. Michael Shamiyeh (Basel: Birkhauser, 2005), 289–305; Tokenistic: Jeremy Till, "The Negotiation of Hope" in *Architecture and Participation*, eds. Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till (Abingdon: Spon Press, 2005), 23–42; Coopted by power: Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation: Crossbench Praxis as a Mode of Criticality* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010); Reformist: Pier Vittorio Aureli, "The Theology of Tabula Rasa: Walter Benjamin and Architecture in the Age of Precarity," *Log*, 27 (2013): 111–127; Absorbed by planning: Hilde Heynen, "Intervention in the Relations of Production, or Sublimation of Contradictions? On Commitment Then and Now," in *New Commitment* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2003), 38–47; Absorbed by the market: Isabelle Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture: Brussels after 1968* (London: Routledge, 2016) and Jesko Fezer and Mathias Heyden. "Under Construction: Strategies of Participative Architecture and Spatial Appropriation," translated from the German by Elizabeth Felicella and Ines Schaber, in *What Remains of a Building Divided into Equal Parts and Distributed for Reconfiguration*, eds. Ken Ehrlich and Brendon LaBelle (Berlin: Errant Bodies Press, 2009); Ethically hidden from judgement: Ethically hidden from judgement: Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012) and Paul Jones and Kenton Card, "Constructing 'Social Architecture': The Politics of Representing Practice," *Architectural Theory Review* 16, no. 3 (2011): 228–244.
- 4 The retreat of architecture into speculative image-making was explored by Tahl Kaminer, *Architecture, Crisis and Resuscitation: The Reproduction of Post-Fordism in Late-Twentieth-Century Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2011). The question of efficacy in architectural practice, with specific relevance to participatory modes, is explored further by Kaminer through his analysis of recent claims to agency for architecture and the political theories on which these claims rely: Tahl Kaminer, *The Efficacy of Architecture. Political Contestation and Agency* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

more involved in the crucial decisions regarding its form and the process by which it takes shape has been taken as simultaneously obvious and revolutionary.

The widely differing modes of practice which have resulted have been subject to a spectrum of critical reactions from the broader discipline. Its various formulations have been lauded as generating a more emancipatory built environment, but also derided as corroding the discipline's foundational expertise. Recent discourse regarding participation in architectural practices has made clear that a key problem for such practices lies in their relationship to the broader systems of power which frame their projects. Critics such as the Berlin-based architect and writer Markus Miessen have argued that, despite claims of a transformative agenda, these practices are regularly co-opted by power, utilized to placate opposition, and prevent rather than enable progressive change.² The perceived failure of participatory architecture to achieve its emancipatory intentions has been attributed to its having become, variously, manipulative, populist, tokenistic, co-opted by power, reformist, absorbed by planning, absorbed by the market, and ethically hidden from judgement.³ I argue that these evaluations share a common claim, that participatory architecture, as it has been practised, lacks the means to critically understand and act upon the social and political situations in which it is engaged. So-called critical practices of architecture have been judged equally ineffective at creating substantive change, unable to engage with the world as it is and instead retreating into abstract, speculative and utopian projects.⁴ Placing the discourses together, it would appear that, while participatory forms of architecture have difficulty maintaining criticality towards the relational power structures through which they operate, critical forms of architecture have somewhat reciprocal limitations in regard to participating in reality. The Belgian architectural historian Hilde Heynen has outlined the overlapping problems encountered by both participatory and critical-visionary architecture in achieving genuine efficacy.⁵ She concluded her survey with the provocative claim that "[t]o avoid the traps that have meant the end of the ideals of participation and visionary architecture, a sort of hybridization between the two attitudes ought to take place."⁶

As a possible means to navigate this question, and explore the potentials of Heynen's proposed hybrid of participation and criticality in architecture, I return to the notion of the "realistic utopia" developed by one of the leading early exponents of participation, the Italian architect, urbanist, writer and educator, Giancarlo De Carlo (1919–2005). I argue that beyond a nostalgic search for origins, De Carlo's writings provide concrete tools for architects practising today.⁷ While recent authors, such as Miessen, position their critique of participation and its potential "critical" reformulation as a novel enterprise, I argue for a recognition of the deep roots of criticality in the work of early pioneers such as De Carlo.

- 5 Heynen, "Intervention in the Relations of Production."
- 6 Ibid., 46.
- 7 In this regard, I build on the work of Camillo Boano, who has previously referred to De Carlo's conception of the 'realistic utopia' as a potential conceptual device for balancing autonomy and participation: "Practicing *Dissensus*. Intersections between Design Research and Critical Urbanism." Conference notes, presented at the DPU's Sixtieth Anniversary Conference: Reimagining Planning in the Urban Global South, July 2-4, 2014.
- 8 For example: "recently it seems that Giancarlo De Carlo's contribution to architecture has been distilled into a single idea – *participation*," Britt Eversole, "Reputations: Giancarlo De Carlo," *Architectural Review* 235 (2014): 110; "De Carlo was one who supported participation, but the matter is not as simple as that," Isabella Daidone, "Il Ruolo dell'architettura nei confronti della società. L'attualità di Giancarlo De Carlo," *Esempi di Architettura* 2 (2015): 1; "His texts on participation have often been the subject of partisan and banal interpretations, with never-ending references being made to his iconic statement that 'architecture is too important to be left to the architects'" Ludovico Centis, "The Public of Architecture: Conflict and Consensus," *San Rocco* 12 (2016): 73.
- 9 As he said in an interview with Benedict Zucchi in 1990: "As for the issue of participation... every time I heard people talk about it with reference to my work I feel uncomfortable. First of all because I do not like being labelled (I am not a specialist but a generalist, as I believe every architect should be); second, because the idea of participation is loaded with an enormous number of misunderstandings." Giancarlo De Carlo, "Conversation with Giancarlo De Carlo," interview by Benedict Zucchi, in Benedict Zucchi, *Giancarlo De Carlo* (Oxford: Butterworth, 1992), 168.
- 10 Giancarlo De Carlo, "Altri appunti sulla partecipazione (con riferimento a un settore dell'architettura dove sembrerebbe piu'ovvia)," *Parametro* 52 (1976): 50, as quoted and translated by Mirko Zardini, "Crestomazia decarliana / Decarlian Anthology," *Lotus International* 86 (1995): 107.

Participation, both as a theoretical concept and as a mode of practice, has come to be strongly associated with De Carlo and understood as one of his defining contributions to the discipline. Many writing on De Carlo have noted that an over-simplified understanding of this association has obscured the full scope of his contribution to architectural thought and the specific possibilities of participation within it.⁸ De Carlo himself was evidently frustrated by this.⁹ He expressed reservations about the term almost as soon as he began discussing it, commenting in 1976: "The term 'participation' now covers a wide variety of meanings and the most suspect of intentions."¹⁰ The ambiguity and misuse of the term continues to this day. While the radical levelling of power relations implied by De Carlo's original descriptions remains a goal for some, "participation" is employed as a description for a vast array of different

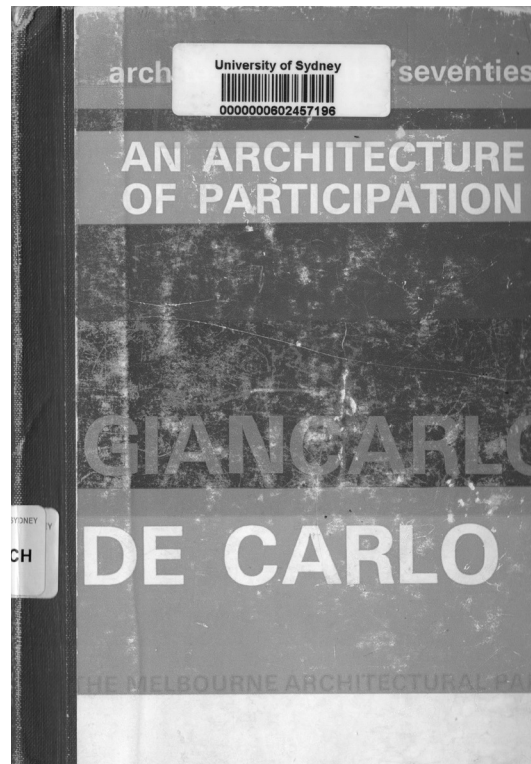


fig. 1 Cover of the 1972 publication of *An Architecture of Participation*. Source: Giancarlo De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*. (Melbourne: Royal Australian Institute of Architects Victorian Chapter, 1972).

- 11 Tahl Kaminer and Maroš Krivý provide a concise summary of some of the directions that have been taken in this evolution. “Whereas participatory planning remained important in much of Latin America, in Western Europe it has been integrated into planning policies in diluted forms such as ‘public consultation’. In the United States, many of the Community Design Centres established in the late 1960s and early 70s ended up by the late 1980s as low-profile and limited-impact neighbourhood organisations. The realisation of the Non-Plan in the development of free enterprise zones, such as the London Docklands, has been acknowledged by Paul Barker, one of the authors of the original proposal; the lessons learnt at Urbino have been mostly forgotten, overwhelmed by individualist-consumerist forms of participation, such as the ‘shopping list’ consultation process of the WIMBY project in Hoogvliet, whereas the ‘diverse city’ has fostered gentrification and mutated into the ‘creative city’.” Maroš Krivý and Tahl Kaminer, “Introduction: The Participatory Turn in Urbanism,” *Footprint* 7, no. 2 (2013): 1.
- 12 Gillian Rose, “Athens and Jerusalem: A Tale of Three Cities,” *Social & Legal Studies* 3 (1994): 336. Jeremy Till, “Architecture of the Impure Community,” in *Occupying Architecture*, ed. Jonathan Hill (New York: Routledge, 1998), 61–75.
- 13 Numerous authors have highlighted these problems. See Fran Tonkiss, “Austerity Urbanism and the Makeshift City,” *City*, 17, no. 3 (2013): 312–324; Pier Vittorio Aureli, “The Theology of Tabula Rasa: Walter Benjamin and Architecture in the Age of Precarity,” *Log* 27 (2013): 111–27.
- 14 The idea that De Carlo’s formulation was an explicitly critical one has been argued by scholars such as Pelin Tan. See Pelin Tan, “Giancarlo De Carlo and Critical Participation,” in *Adhocrcacy/Adhokrasi*, eds. V.Sacchetti, A.Rajagopal, T.Shafirir (Istanbul: Istanbul Art and Cultural Foundation, 2012), 71–5.
- 15 De Carlo, “Altri appunti,” 50.

practices with widely ranging agendas.¹¹ A common thread can be followed across these diverse lineages, whereby the initially transformative power of participation has been subsequently dispersed and diluted. This has been claimed as a diminution of the architect’s role through ineffectual populism, in which the architect’s rejection of authority does not necessarily translate to empowerment of the people.¹² More problematic for those who claim to be enacting a participatory architecture as an equitable, emancipatory practice are the observations that it can actively manipulate the users it is intended to liberate, providing token processes which shift nothing of consequence yet provide ethical cover for those extracting value from the commodification of the city.¹³ In both cases, the understanding of participation is limited to the narrow relationship between architect and user and a short phase in the design process.

A close reading of De Carlo’s work reveals a much broader and more critical concept of participation than what has come to be understood.¹⁴ For De Carlo, participation was a radical means to multiply the possibilities of architecture through a process which never achieved closure and continually opened conflicts. It was an expansive concept, intended to draw in and operate on the full scope of social “forces” throughout the entire process of each “architectural event”—from setting basic project parameters to modifications and evaluations of constructed buildings in use. De Carlo tentatively defined participation as “a process that has the aim of giving everyone equal decision-making power. Or: as a series of continuous and interdependent actions that tend to a situation in which everyone shares power in equal measure.”¹⁵ His position was that it was yet to occur, functioning for the time being as a utopia, a horizon to constantly strive for. It was an operation which could not be limited to the interaction between architect and user, but was, rather, directed towards a total levelling of the power structure.¹⁶

While De Carlo’s description of the realistic utopia plays a key role in the structure of *An Architecture of Participation*, it lasts for only four pages and does not reappear in later writings under the same name. Subsequent references to it by others have primarily focused on a broad framing of participation as a utopian enterprise.¹⁷ I will argue that the realistic utopia has value beyond this, as a conceptual frame through which De Carlo’s notion of participation can be understood as an explicitly critical practice. Further, I will argue that, in combination with his proximate notion of critical image-making, it can be understood as a tool by means of which speculative practices can be deployed within a practice of participation. The realistic utopia of participation was, for De Carlo, a means to stimulate social change through the practice of architecture, albeit indirectly, by providing iterative critical alternatives in a dialectic relationship with its intended public. As such, the key to De Carlo’s understanding of the realistic utopia lies in the idea of a counter-image that is capable of both critiquing a present situation and proposing an alternative. As a complex

16 “I suppose at this point, that I should try to define the architecture of participation and to give some idea of how it could be practised. This is not an easy thing to do because the architecture of participation does not yet exist. Nor does there exist any authentic form of participation, at least not in those parts of the world we define as ‘civilized.’ We have participation, in fact, only when everyone takes part equally in the management of the power structure, or when the power structure no longer exists because everyone is directly and equally involved in the process of decision making.” Giancarlo De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*. (Melbourne: Royal Australian Institute of Architects Victorian Chapter, 1972), 25.

17 For example, see Giacomo Polin, “Inside an Outsider,” in *Giancarlo De Carlo. Schizzi inediti*, eds. Anna De Carlo and Giacomo Polin (Milan: Fondazione La Triennale di Milano, 2014), 19. Notable exceptions, whose work I build on, include Sara Marini: Sara Marini, “Introduzione: Scegliere la parte” in *L’architettura della partecipazione*, comp. Sara Marini (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2015), 14.

18 The oration was given hours after the public memorial service for Boyd: Neil Clerehan. “Editors note,” in De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*, iii.

19 J. M. Richards, *A Critic’s View* (Melbourne: Royal Australian Institute of Architects Victorian Chapter, 1971); Peter Blake, *The New Forces* (Melbourne: Royal Australian Institute of Architects Victorian Chapter, 1971).

20 As discussed in chapter 2, Blake had also used De Carlo’s own work, the colleges in Urbino, as a particular emerging approach: Blake, *The New Forces*, 37–39.

21 Giancarlo De Carlo, “Il pubblico dell’architettura,” *Parametro* 5, (1970): 4–12, 98. As noted in De Carlo’s introduction, the article was developed from a lecture given the previous year in Liège: Giancarlo De Carlo, “L’architecture est-elle trop importante pour être confiée aux architectes,” in *L’architecte n’a plus d’audience. Quel est l’avenir du domaine bâti*, ed. Elmar Wertz (Liège: L’association pour le progrès intellectuel et artistique de la wallonie, 1969), 19.

22 Giancarlo De Carlo, Peter Blake, J.M Richards, *L’architettura degli anni settanta*, (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1973).

conceptual device the realistic utopia is able to connect a number of aspects of De Carlo’s thoughts on participation, thereby expanding its scope to critically engage with the full relational context in which architecture is planned, produced and inhabited.

The Realistic Utopia within an Architecture of Participation

In October 1971, De Carlo delivered a lecture in Melbourne at the invitation of Australian architect and critic Robin Boyd, whose unexpected death days earlier added an emotionally charged context to the event.¹⁸ It was the final in a series of three annual lectures initiated in 1969 entitled “The Architecture of the Seventies,” a title which conveyed a speculative intent to anticipate future architectural developments. De Carlo’s lecture responded to what he referred to as the “hypotheses” put forth in the first two lectures: the first from J.M. Richards, editor of the British journal *Architectural Review*, the second from Peter Blake, editor of the American journal *Architectural Forum*.¹⁹ De Carlo summarizes their respective positions as Richards providing an account of the legacy of the modern movement in producing a generally technically-driven built environment, punctuated by “exceptional architectural episodes,” while Blake had focussed on the emerging trends of “disorder” and influences from Pop-Art.²⁰ In his own contribution, De Carlo revisited much of the same content of his 1970 article “Il pubblico dell’architettura” (Architecture’s Public).²¹ Here he situated it within the frames provided by the previous contributions of Richards and Blake, building on Richards’ critique of the modern movement and using Blake as a foil in terms of “populistic jubilation.” The lectures would all be published in English as *The Melbourne Architecture Papers* series (figure 1) and De Carlo would later work with the publisher, Il Saggiatore, to publish Italian translations of the three talks in a single compilation.²²

De Carlo differentiated his contribution as based less on the evaluation of current trends but, rather, “a projection of my own hopes.” The lecture bears the explicit title “An Architecture of Participation” and is a clear extension and development of some of the key concepts introduced in “Il pubblico.” It covers much of the same material, whereby the critique of power relations still forms the backbone of the argument, the modern movement is again called upon to explain how architecture has lost its relevance, and the proposed process of participation is articulated through the same three interconnected phases. The crucial addition is the introduction and articulation of the specific term “realistic utopia,” which forms part of an expanded section dealing with the role of the architectural “counter-image” in relation to changes within society.

The context of late 1960s and early 1970s in which De Carlo was writing was one in which utopian and speculative forms of architectural projections were highly visible, particularly through the work of protagonists

- 23 Alexandra Brown, "Radical Restructuring: Autonomies in Italian Architecture & Design 1968–73" (PhD diss., University of Queensland, 2014), 83–141.
- 24 Brown, "Radical Restructuring," 130. Brown is quoting De Carlo from Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Triennale di Milano 68. A Case Study and Beyond Arata Isozaki's Electronic Labyrinths. A 'Ma' of Images," in *Iconoclash*, eds. Peter Weibel and Bruno Latour (Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2002), 368.
- 25 Brown, "Radical Restructuring," 130.
- 26 Sara Catenacci, "Maieutica del progetto. Riccardo Dalisi tra architettura, design e 'animazione', 1967–1974," *L'Uomo Nero*, anno XII, no. 11–12 (May 2015): 187.
- 27 Giovanni Damiani, "Anarchy is not Disorder: Reflections on Participation and Education," in *Team 10: 1953–81, In Search of a Utopia of the Present*, eds. Max Risselada and Dirk van den Heuvel (Rotterdam: NAI, 2005), 287.
- 28 De Carlo, "Il pubblico," 9.

such as the radical Florentine groups Archizoom and Superstudio and the London-based Archigram, among many others. De Carlo was well aware of these practices. In the highly controversial 1968 Triennale which De Carlo curated, alongside works by his Team 10 colleagues the Smithsons and van Eyck, was the "urban fiction" of Archigram's "Mutazione dell'ambiente nell'epoca del Grande Numero (Milanogram)" and Arata Isozaki's dystopian "Electric Labyrinth." A temporary pavilion linked to the Palazzo by a pneumatic tunnel housed works by a number of those soon to be called "radical architects," who would go on to produce some of the most powerful and influential "visionary" architecture of the 1970s. Alexandra Brown describes the connection between the Fourteenth Triennale and the "New Domestic Landscape" exhibition in her thesis.²³ According to Brown, De Carlo did not actively welcome the participants from this group, both because of his desire to distance the Triennale from the production of luxury goods and his dismissal of their aim to make "architecture coincide with design."²⁴ Despite the possible correspondence between the speculative work of these diverse groups and De Carlo's notion of the realistic utopia, he appears not to have credited them with anything beyond "some interesting ideas."²⁵ The deepest connection with this group appears to be the brief correspondence between De Carlo and Riccardo Dalisi, who would go on to co-found Global Tools, around their divergent notions of participation. Sara Catenacci's analysis of this interaction suggests that, while Dalisi's experimentation was of some interest to De Carlo, he critiqued it for being overly theoretical and for aestheticizing the notion of "disorder."²⁶

Certainly, there was a deeper correspondence of ideas, both in terms of "utopia" as well as "participation," with the diverse practices and ideologies gathered under the banner of Team 10. For architecture scholar Giovanni Damiani, writing on the specific role of participation in Team 10 discourse: "Seeking to supersede form was a way for these architects to pursue and carry forward the ethical force and power of renewal that were originally part of the Modern Movement and were eventually lost when it turned into the International Style."²⁷ In some respects, this "ethical force" has parallels with utopia, both being aspects of the modern movement which Team 10 members were originally seeking to expand and, later, simply to preserve.

In *An Architecture of Participation*, the image of architecture is key both in the diagnosis of the profession's ills and as a site for its renewal. *An Architecture of Participation* begins with a detailed analysis of the contemporary representation of architecture with explicit reference to its exclusion of the user. This is developed from the last of the "good reasons for the non-credibility of architecture" as they had appeared in "Il pubblico," which dealt specifically with the absence of the user in architectural publications.²⁸ De Carlo contrasts the "compulsive need to eliminate people" in modern architectural publications with the forms of

29 De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*, 253.

30 De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*, 25. De Carlo goes on to state that “the practice of participation can find its full definition only when participation is in practice,” 29.

31 De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*, 25. Numerous commentators have connected De Carlo’s attitudes on participation to his anarchist politics. See for example Francesco Samassa “A building is not a building in not a building: The anarchitecture of Giancarlo De Carlo” in Giancarlo De Carlo: Percorsi, edited by Francesco Samassa (Milan: Il Poligrafo, Venice: IUAV Archivio Progetto, 2004).

32 De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*, 25.

33 De Carlo, “Il pubblico,” 8.

representation that pre-dated “the appearance of perspective (the individual mono-centrism of vision).” In these earlier representations, which lacked a singular prioritized view, “[p]eople appeared as the real subjects of objects created for their use. Architecture consisted not simply of buildings but of people and buildings bound in a relationship of reciprocal necessity.”²⁹

Through the explanation of the “realistic utopia,” the transformative role of images becomes central to his conception of participation. In content and key argumentation, the section on the realistic utopia plays a similar role in *An Architecture of Participation* as the section in “Il pubblico” on the topic “Architecture is the material cause for the context in which it is placed.” Both are an attempt to articulate his belief that architecture was capable of changing the social structures on which it depends through a system of feedback, involving the iterative production of “counter-images.” In both texts, this material follows immediately after De Carlo’s attempt to define his notion of participation in architecture and provides the first justification for this move.

In *An Architecture of Participation*, De Carlo first uses the term utopia as a rhetorical objection to his own scheme for participation — defined, conditionally, as the state in which “everyone is directly or equally involved in the process of decision making.” The utopian end-state of participation could be described as an architecture existing in complete harmony with all who use it or, as De Carlo himself describes it, “when either everyone takes part equally in the management of the power structure, or when the power structure has been completely dissolved into a state of permanent shared decision making.”³⁰ It is an architecture of total freedom and total equality, the structure of a particular kind of politics.³¹ In outlining his vision of participation, De Carlo acknowledges that “someone will raise the immediate objection that I am describing a Utopia, and this is a good objection. It is, however, a realistic Utopia, and this makes a big difference.”³² Rather than defending participation against the accusation of utopianism, however, he embraces the term and uses his notion of participation to define an alternative variety of utopia, one capable of engaging with the realities in which it is set. Over several pages, De Carlo then explains how the realistic utopia can be understood and enacted, sketching out a very particular way of reframing the utility of the utopian form. In previous writings, De Carlo had dismissed the work of contemporary architecture as avoiding the real issues of mass society by escaping into the production of “formal utopias (...) designed for the most part for art galleries.”³³ Here, he re-states the common critique of utopia as fantasy, which he attributes to avoidance of the true complexity of context. The fundamental weakness of such an approach for De Carlo is the lack of concern for the many variables of which the current situation is composed. He proposes an alternative form, the “realistic” utopia which, instead of substituting these variables, retains them and focusses on reworking the relationships between them.

34 De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*, 25.

35 De Carlo, "Il pubblico," 10.

36 De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*, 26.

Utopia, as it is commonly understood, is an impossible notion because it is derived from a total alteration of the context. That is: it does not take into account all the variables constituting the reality to which it is opposed. If, instead, we take all present variables into account, and if we assume that their relationship could be different—because, in fact, they could be—then the Utopia is realistic.³⁴

De Carlo's conception of the realistic utopia can be understood as operating at two quite distinct levels in his thesis of participation. At the most obvious, the entire reworking of architectural practice implied by "participation" is a realistic utopia. Simultaneously, the realistic utopia, understood as a very specific kind of architectural "image" or "object," is the primary means by which *An Architecture of Participation* is elicited, evolved and enacted. De Carlo had already sketched a role for the speculative architectural image in terms of societal change in "Il pubblico." While stressing the total dependence of architecture on the societal structures in which it is produced, he emphasizes the possibility for changes within the "superstructure" of architecture to resonate with and effect the ongoing changes in society at large. He located this change-making potential of architecture in the projective act of image-making. Specifically, architecture was "able to produce concrete images of what the physical environment could be like if the structures of society were different."³⁵ It is in this context that De Carlo argues for the potential role of the architectural image in stimulating change in surrounding social structures by exposing their inherent conflicts and contradictions.

He articulates the possibility for the realistic utopia as an architectural image to critically affect its context through two specific "premises." The first is that architectural images, understood as speculative reconfigurations of the physical and relational context to better fit the "reality" of the social forces in existence, can be effective even when they remain unrealized and, as such, purely speculative.

an architectural image can have important effects even if does not succeed in becoming a reality.... It can explode the most deeply rooted commonplaces, expose the stupidity or injustice of situations which are passively accepted, awaken the consciousness of rights which no-one had dared to demand, outline a goal hitherto unknown which, henceforth becomes a conscious aim.³⁶

In support of this claim, he provides examples of "counter-heroes" who "produced a whole series of images which, although not immediately successful, have nevertheless not only upset architectural and urbanistic thought, but have also contributed to the rotation of political and social perspective of their contemporaries and of the following generations."

- 37 De Carlo offers “the case of communication” as a proof for the fertility of internal contradictions as sites for alternatives to grow. Here he observes the way in which “all the systems of the so-called civilized world” seek social control by making communication technology ubiquitous. Yet to do so requires them to be made ever smaller and cheaper, which results in the contradiction that “[t]he system produces instruments of control to increase its power, but, at the same time, these means become immediately available to those who intend to defend their independence against the expansion of the system.” De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*, 27.
- 38 For example: “[T]he procedure suffers at every stage from the abstractness accepted at the beginning when the activity was taken out of its context, cutting its ties with reality.” Giancarlo De Carlo, “How/Why to Build School Buildings,” 24.
- 39 De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*, 3.
- 40 De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*, 12. The centrality of the notion of conflict in De Carlo’s work is highlighted by Ludovico Centis. According to Centis, it was the exploration of conflict and contradictions within the present conditions that interested De Carlo in Utopia as a specific tool. Ludovico Centis, “The Public of Architecture,” 69.

He includes on this list “Robert Owen, Victor Considerant, Benjamin Richardson, William Morris, Piotr Kropotkin, Patrick Geddes, and—why not? Mr. Paxton and Mr. Eiffel, and then Henry Sullivan, Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier for a large part of their contradictory contributions.” This list provides insight into what De Carlo considered an “architectural image” in the first place. While he is not explicit about what “an architectural image” comprises, the list would suggest that “images” can be understood as a diverse set of forms including political writings, architectural representations, and constructed buildings. In both texts, De Carlo refers directly to images as drawings and other projective media, while at other times he speaks of written images and of literally “constructing” images. From these various uses, the term “image” is taken to represent a projection of architecture in its broadest sense.

De Carlo’s second premise for the efficacy of the realistic utopia is that, although existing systems of society, politics and finance may seem immobile and unchangeable, they are never perfect and always contain internal contradictions. Using spatial metaphors, he describes the inherent contradictions of present systems of power as “cracks,” “gaps,” and “networks of fissures.” These become the spaces in which innovative events can be inserted and, from there, can grow to destabilize and even “rupture” the present system. De Carlo’s formulation of working in the cracks can be understood as operating at two levels: by drawing attention to contradiction or injustice; and by using the opportunity of that “gap” to frame an alternative which is able to grow as a challenge to the structures from which it had developed.³⁷ Taken together, the notions of images having effects to highlight contradictions, and of these contradictions being the primary site for these images to operate, form the articulation of what De Carlo saw as the possibility for the realistic utopia, understood as an architectural image, to provide a critical tool within the architecture of participation.

It is important at this point to seek some clarification of what De Carlo means when he speaks of “reality” and the condition of being “realistic.” “Context” and “reality” are often joined or equated in his writing.³⁸ It is the close and critical attendance to context that enables the “fantasy” of utopia to become “realistic” and, therefore, productive. When discussing the erasure of the user in contemporary architectural publications, he speaks of the current “dichotomy of architecture and reality” in terms of what he perceives as a prevalent notion that architecture should not be “contaminated with the concrete aspects of everyday life,” a notion evidenced by the absence of people in architectural representations.³⁹ By qualifying utopia as realistic, and by tying “reality” explicitly to the social, this notion can be understood as quite distinct from what is often understood by “utopian” architecture. Here, context is explicitly conceptualized as the social reality: “the context is the whole pattern of social forces, with all its conflicts and contradictions.”⁴⁰

41 De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*, 25–26.

42 De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*, 37.

Context and, therefore reality, is understood as a vast network of relationships. It is these which must be closely attended to in order to make the realistic utopia viable:

If the counter-image of the organization of physical space, without omitting the forces which act in the context and taking into account both their present and potential energies, upsets the image which is derived from the present artificial situation, then that counter image is a realistic Utopia.⁴¹

This passage defines a key quality of the realistic utopia, that of being both critical and propositional. De Carlo describes the realistic utopia as a specific kind of image, the counter-image, that is, an alternative formulation of how to do things. While initially he introduces the realistic utopia to describe his reformulation of practice towards participation, here it is related to the organization of physical space. As discussed above, his notion of the image was broad and can be taken here to include images of building configurations, city forms, societal relationships, property distribution and, indeed, design processes such as participation itself. The central point is that such counter-images are only viable if they are drawn from a comprehensive analysis of the present “image” of these elements, the context that has framed these images and all the relational dynamics at work. Through this analysis, it is possible to identify the points of contradiction, where the “potential energies” (particularly the needs, desires and perspectives of the users) are not satisfied by the present image and to use these as the basis for its re-formulation as a counter-image.

These counter-images themselves are open to change. The counter-image can be directly related to his “formulation of hypotheses,” which, would replace the traditional design phase. In “Il pubblico,” the “hypothesis” reframes the production of the architect’s design work from that of finding solutions to that of producing images which catalyse discussion, debate and questioning of its underpinning assumptions. This same notion is re-iterated in *An Architecture of Participation*:

The designer’s job is no longer to produce finished and unalterable solutions, but to extract solutions from a continuous confrontation with those who will use his work. His energy and imagination will be completely directed to raising the level of awareness of his partners in the discussion, and the solution will come out of the exchanges between the two, passing through a series of alternatives which come closer and closer to the real nature of the problem with which they are dealing.⁴²

Each “alternative” and “solution” here can be understood as a form of the realistic utopia, never constructed in isolation but always in direct

confrontation with its possible users. By understanding the realistic utopia in terms of the hypothesis, we can see its potential mutability as part of an ongoing process: each instance of the realistic utopia being contingent on its interaction with its future users (figure 2).

The schema of process planning allows us to consider the implications of the realistic utopia beyond images to actualized objects of architecture. Although he uses the concept of stages as a heuristic device in his description of the architecture of participation, De Carlo makes it clear that it is continuous and iterative. The building itself is only one in an ongoing series of hypotheses, themselves each a means to reconsider the original needs, which, once revised, set off a new round of hypotheses:

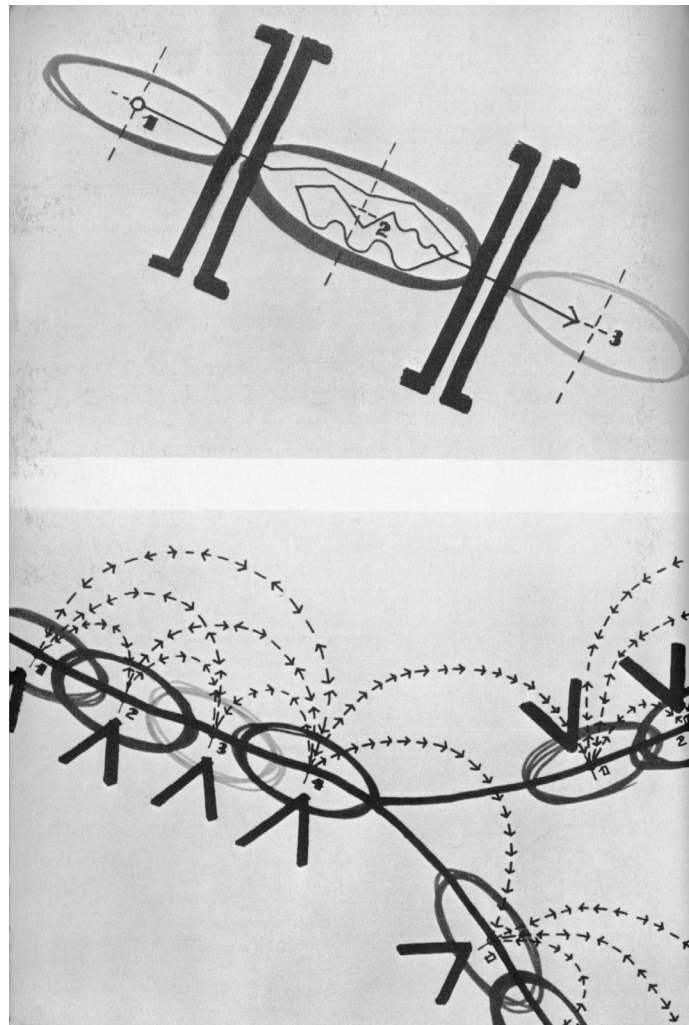


fig. 2 Images from the 1972 publication of *An Architecture of Participation*. The two diagrams contrast the “linear” process of “authoritarian planning” (above) versus the iterative and interconnected process of an architecture of participation (below). Source: Giancarlo De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*, 34.

- 43 Giancarlo De Carlo, "Architecture's Public," in Blundell-Jones et al., *Architecture and Participation*, 21. The idea that buildings themselves can be "hypotheses" underpinned De Carlo's staged approach for the Villaggio Matteotti housing project in Terni. There, an initial phase of the project was constructed and was intended, through its use and feedback from residents, to inform the design of subsequent stages. The project never proceeded beyond the first stage, leaving this process itself as an untested hypothesis.
- 44 De Carlo, *An Architecture of Participation*, 12.

In process planning, the carrying out in three-dimensional physical terms of the plan is a tentative hypothesis. Its verification comes about through use and is therefore entrusted to the user who confronts the built environment in experiencing it. This phase which adjusts, subtracts, adds to, or modifies the design is still part of the project.⁴³

In *An Architecture of Participation*, De Carlo clarifies his understanding of the possible agency of architectural form itself in relation to social change. Here it is framed, in very similar terms to the realistic utopia, as something that can exert influence, but only indirectly:

At this point, not to be misunderstood, let me say that I believe that forms can modify human behaviour. Moreover, I believe there are circumstances in which forms have the potential to shape images which can contribute to social change. But I believe that this process is reticulate, not linear; that forms react on human behaviour only through feedbacks; that these feedbacks happen and have positive influence only when forms maintain a continuous coherence with the context which generates them; that the context is the whole pattern of social forces, with all its conflicts and contradictions, and not simply the pattern of institutional forces.⁴⁴

These statements, taken together, provide an understanding of what De Carlo saw as the means through which the objects of architecture, both images and built forms, could actively participate in a dialogue with society understood as a complexity of antagonistic forces. For him architectural forms do not act directly but, rather, "shape images," which themselves may "contribute" to social change via reticulated processes of feedback. Again, as with the realistic utopia, these forms can only have a "positive influence" when they are closely attentive to the context from which they are drawn. Context here is used in an expanded sense, drawing in a complex network of relational associations. Accordingly, it is possible to extend De Carlo's concept of the realistic utopia to potentially include all of the products of architecture, but only ever as tentative, suggestive moments, intended to instigate their own replacement and thriving and continuing only in concert with their intended users.

An Expanded Notion of the Realistic Utopia

When De Carlo scholars have engaged with the realistic utopia, they have predominantly discussed the term in framing participation as a realistic utopia. My interest here is in understanding how the concept may operate *within* an architecture of participation, using speculative image making to critically engage with the broader social, political and financial contexts which frame its projects. In order to understand how the realistic utopia can

45 Ana Jeinić, “Neoliberalism and the Crisis of the Project... in Architecture and Beyond.” in *Is There (Anti-)Neoliberal Architecture?* ed. Ana Jeinić and Anselm Wagner (Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2013), 64–77. Britt Eversole, “Populism and Regressive Utopia, Again and Again,” *Project 6* (Spring 2017): 55.

operate in this way, I have argued that it needs to be connected to De Carlo’s reframing of design within the process of participation as “hypotheses,” images of possible architectures intended to critically confront future users and to be critically reworked in response to the new demands they elicit. De Carlo intended these hypotheses to call into question the basic assumptions of the project, be critiqued by the potential user and reworked by the architect in response. This sets up an iterative process whereby the images act to make the inherent conflicts of a project visible at the same time as a provisional resolution of them is sought and subsequently replaced by a more appropriate one. I have argued that it is this sense of the critical, speculative image being in constant, iterative circulation between architect and user which makes possible the close attention to the vast set of relationships, forces and variables that is called for by his description of the realistic utopia. It is this broader conception of the realistic utopia which I see as providing a conceptual tool for architects practising today.

Through the realistic utopia, De Carlo framed the role of the architect as a producer of critical-propositional images which simultaneously called into question the basic elements of budget, programme and location and proposed alternate physical, environmental manifestations of these factors. Crucially, these images were provisional and open to criticism by the participants, thereby raising further questions and generating further images in response. Through this iterative, cyclical process, the complexity of reality could be incrementally revealed, making the realistic utopia a means by which reality could be critically understood and potentially transformed.

The realistic utopia pre-empts recent calls to reintroduce practices of utopian speculation as a means for architecture to critically confront existing political realities, by providing images of their alternatives. The political, social and economic conditions of neoliberalism have been identified as particularly problematic for the practice of participation to operate without being subsumed and appropriated, as made clear through the work of Tahl Kaminer, Fran Tonkiss and others. Ana Jeinic and Britt Eversole have advocated a return to utopian practice in architecture in response to the anti-utopianism of neoliberalism and the regressive utopianism of populist politics, respectively.⁴⁵ The idea of the realistic utopia, while drawn up against a very different set of systems to those encountered today, nevertheless provides a very particular model of how critical utopian images can be useful to a practice concerned with participation.

My original intention was to seek a possibility for participatory practices of architecture to maintain criticality in practice. While the realistic utopia can be used to interpret such an approach in existing practices, I argue that it could equally be used consciously as a mode of practice. De Carlo’s preoccupation with re-asserting the relevance of the architectural profession remains current in a discipline whose role

has been steadily eroded by project managers and others. In this regard, a possible way for architects to return to relevance could be as realistic utopians-in-residence, attending to the many and multiple desires gathered around a particular location, creating images of alternatives and refining them in critical dialogue with their relevant communities of concern.

In conclusion, let me return to one of the projects I introduced at the beginning of this thesis to frame my misgivings about participatory architecture's potential for criticality—the public consultation on public space in a contested and rapidly gentrifying area of Sydney. As this project has developed, slowly over four years, we have chosen to adopt the realistic utopian-in-residence as our own model of practice. We have channelled our discussions with various sectors of the public into the production of images of possible public spaces for the site, ranging from a vast phytoremediation forest to rid the site of decades of dry-cleaning contaminants, to a proposal to raise the entire development on stilts, preserving the open field below as true uncommodified public space. To our surprise, the municipality has taken our speculative visions seriously, embedding elements into their regulatory framework. Through negotiation with the landowners, each element has been reduced—from a forest to a set of “pods,” from a site-wide condition to modifications at the building edges. Utopia has been bargained down due to the realities of commercial tenancies and the potential liabilities of exposing the toxins in the ground. While it is hard to say yet if anything of these original visions will remain, it would appear we have secured one element. The public art funding from developer levies will, on this site, not be used to fund monumental sculptures and façade elements. Instead it will be used to pay for an ongoing set of residencies, each tasked with continuing discussions with the diverse public of this site, proposing new uses, forming new collectives and augmenting the public space over a period of twenty years. In this way, while our original “hypotheses” may never bear fruit, the process of realistic-utopian-production will, we hope, roll on.