

# Utopian Opportunists

Mark Pasnik

The marketplace has long been an influential force in the work of academic and corporate architects alike, from OMA to HOK. Despite the fact that Utile shares this widespread fixation, it is difficult to situate the firm's work within the contemporary architectural scene. On the one hand, Utile's workish preoccupation with development, net-to-gross ratios, and issues of code does not fit comfortably within the circles of academic practices, whose projects are conceptually driven and often designed for patronage clients. On the other hand, Utile's methodology and intellectual mission are different from the work of corporate firms who provide the professional services for most real estate developers. The expected answer — that Utile's work resides somewhere between — is too trite a turn of phrase, belying the very tactical way in which Utile's designers are both avant-gardists and pragmatists, and equally the ways in which they are distinctly neither.

Much of the avant-garde has spent the last decades examining the relationship between design and external forces, particularly global capitalism. This line of thought is most clearly represented in the work of contemporary Dutch architects — the dascapes of MVRDV or OMA's program diagrams — where architecture is a reflection of mass consumer forces. The architect effectively steps aside and allows these forces to be unleashed, resulting in an architecture that is both derived from and cynically critical of capitalism. By contrast, most global development actually occurs in service firms and professionalized design offices like SOM and HOK, where such self-consciousness of the intellectual value of information is anathema. In this context, information and marketplace criteria drive the project in an uncritical but equally disengaged fashion. The architect serves the forces of the marketplace.

Utile has been critical of both positions, not because of their relation to the marketplace, but precisely because these other architects remain so distant from it. Utile directly engages the market mechanisms that affect building production — without the critical resignation of the avant-garde or the unselfconscious resignation of the service firms. Utile supplants cynicism with hands-on, roll-up-your-sleeves pragmatism; the firm jettisons the subservience to the market as is, instead engaging the marketplace with investigative,

explorative creativity. Utile opportunistically extracts what is useful in both the avant-garde and the pragmatist positions, and with these methodologies, fashions a more complex, less exclusionary, and ultimately entrepreneurial agenda.

Where many architects may enter competitions or go through formal selection processes to pursue work, Utile and its larger network of collaborators have developed a different technique. They have conducted independent design studies that examine potential development scenarios or voids within retail and housing markets, all to seek out opportunities to present to developers and public agencies. This redirected marketing generates commissions that Utile then fills, avoiding the typical competitive process because the firm's discoveries are in advance of a client. Moreover, by identifying potentials within the city, the firm has become a proponent for change, shaping the urban life of its chosen focus, the city of Boston. Utile thus works within the market, but is unafraid to edit from the inside, aspiring to be active progenitors rather than detached commentators on, or sycophants to, the marketplace.

Perhaps surprisingly, Utile's is a utopian model of thought. Architecture culture has long since dropped its commitment to utopia, the ideology that modernism claimed as its moralistic call, but which subsequently fell out of fashion. Indeed, figures today such as Rem Koolhaas still hold a deliberately anti-utopian posture in their writings and processes. But not Utile. Utile's may not be the grand utopia of modernism reborn. It is a modest, transformative utopia of engagement — engagement in areas of practice that the avant-garde has largely ignored, using academic techniques of analysis that corporate firms have long held suspect. This difference is most simply represented in the title of this exhibition. "Antidote" carries with it the connotation of a response that fixes something. How distant this logic is from the belief in criticism and resistance that has dominated architectural discourses for decades.

While many architects today focus their research on such issues as skin or materials or space or light, Utile examines the often unglamorous regulatory requirements of development, the functioning of city agencies, and the politics of public bodies. Utile's agenda seeks to

improve, to cleverly shape, to negotiate and build consensus. As a consequence, Utile's designers are out presenting sustainability initiatives to developers, making arguments for specific housing types to the Boston Redevelopment Authority, reviewing office building proposals for the Massachusetts Port Authority. There is a sense of opportunism reflected in this shoe-leather realism and in the coherent intellectual agenda centered on development. Because both aspects align with the client's self-interest, Utile often achieves the results of its positivist drive to enact change, rather than simply riding the wave of capitalism. Utile's work thus has relevance not only to its client and the firm's initiatives, but to the city. For the avant-garde, this comprehensive type of relevance is underappreciated; for the pragmatist, it is over-determining. Utile gets the balance right.

Utile's architects find reward in creating value within the financial restrictions of a developer's pro forma. The constraints of codes, zoning, and regulation become topics of study and, moreover, welcome elements of the design process. As an illustration, the First + First townhouses in South Boston are smartly engaged with the rules of fire egress. These rules require a second exit if any living space is more than 75 feet away from the entrance. Utile configured the two-car garage, stair, three bedrooms, and even closets (which are outside the requirement) in such a way as to maximize living space, without exceeding the 75-foot rule. By examining this rule and shaping the design process around it, the architects avoided the loss in value a second staircase would have brought. In such seemingly mundane ways, Utile is reshaping the discussion of marketable single-family housing for an urban core, offering a diametrical response to the bigger-is-better mentality currently absorbing the landscape of our suburbs. The single-family type is transformed here to suit contemporary urban lifestyles and purse strings.

The approach has aesthetic ramifications. Utile's architecture typically promotes an economy of means, countering the widespread drive towards "exceptionalism." The Trolley House, a 24-unit condominium building also located in South Boston, is defined by the repetition of a single window type. By using only one type, each window's size could be maximized and its quality increased, while freeing the budget to be distributed to other areas of the

building. Utile's preference for discovering value rather than inventing exceptional form is reaffirmed throughout the design process.

This returns us to the position of Utile in the spectrum of architecture culture. Neither exclusively avant-gardists nor entirely pragmatists, the architects at Utile are perhaps described better as utopian opportunists. They seek out opportunity for high-minded civic betterment in the city through no-nonsense opportunity in the building codes. They do not shy away from discussions of "lifestyle engineering" or "marketability," nor are they entrapped by them. They treat conceptual design, typological invention, and egress planning with equal intellectual seriousness. These characteristics are evident in the projects and diagrams on display in this exhibition, material that provides freshly relevant counterpoints — or in Utile's term, antidotes — to the prevailing practices of architecture today.

Mark Pasnik is an assistant professor of architecture at Wentworth Institute of Technology and a principal at over,under.

This text was produced for the exhibition **How The World Works\*** (\*and other antidotes to architecture's obsession with aesthetic exceptionalism), a presentation of the work and thoughts of Utile, Inc. first shown at the BEB Gallery, Rhode Island School of Design, October 2005.